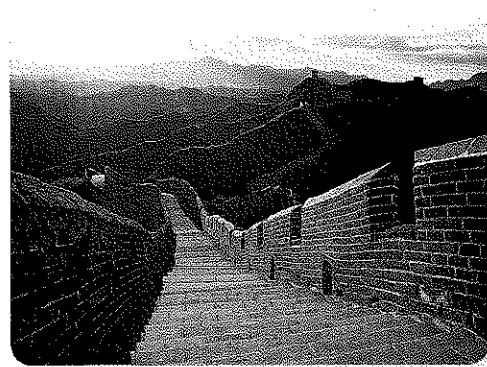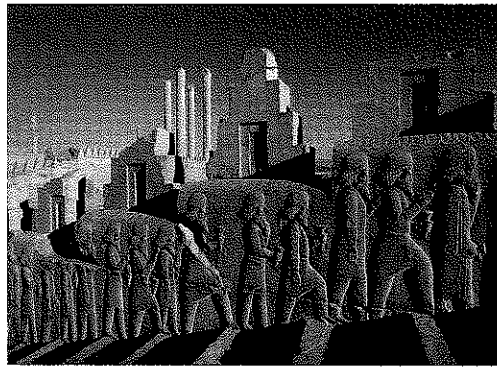# THE FORMATION OF CLASSICAL SOCIETIES, ca. 500 B.C.E. TO ca. 500 C.E.



| AP | FOCUS ON THEMES |
|---|---|

Theme 1: Interaction Between Humans and the Environment
Theme 2: Development and Interaction of Cultures
Theme 3: State Building, Expansion, and Conflict
**Theme 4: Creation, Expansion, and Interaction of Economic Systems**
Theme 5: Development and Transformation of Social Structures

Period 2 of the AP World History curriculum dates from ca. 600 B.C.E. to ca. 600 C.E., and is often called the "classical" era by historians—meaning that something from this period of time became a long-established pattern or tradition extending beyond ca. 600 C.E. Recall that historians often differ in how they classify chronological time periods and dates. In these next chapters, you will read about types of governments, cultural traditions, religions, economic systems, and social structures that developed out of the foundations era (Period 1) to become the patterns of human life for the next two millennia. Period 2 ends ca. 600 C.E. when all these classical empires have collapsed; however, many of their traditions endure.

As populations grew and urban-based societies increased, there were many more opportunities for humans of different regions to come in contact with one another. New technologies of travel, massive road networks, and desires for both trade and conquest made these interactions more common—and when two or more cultures came in contact with one another, their two cultures often combined to create new and vibrant cultural combinations, or cultural syntheses.

The classical era is a time of massive empire-building. The simplest definition of an empire is that it is assembled by conquest, it is large, and it is multi-ethnic. There were small empires in the foundations era (the Babylonian Empire), but the classical empires were huge. Sheer size presented

equally-huge problems: how to build a government structure to manage an empire; how to acquire and pay for large militaries to conquer and maintain the empire; how to communicate with lands far away from the capitol, and how to maintain peace and prosperity within a multi-ethnic population. As you move through this period, take notes on the similarities and differences of how imperial states organized their governments and enforced their authority—that is, whether it enforced through laws, bureaucracies (people who work for the government), militaries, and whether they used religious ideas to bolster their political authority. Another point of comparison is how these empires accommodated their multi-ethnic populations: did they try to dilute the ethnic groups by moving them around, or did they offer them some sort of citizenship or legal tolerance?

Conquest was one way to get to know another culture; another was trade. A major theme of the classical era (Period 2) is the emergence of trade and communications networks with peoples in other regions. These are called either transregional or interregional networks (the terms mean the same thing). We saw smaller versions of these trade routes earlier, but now they are expanded and intensified. There were massive systems of paved or government-maintained roads in all the classical empires, including the Maya and probably the Moche. These routes could be both land- and water-based (maritime).

You need to know where and why specific trade routes existed, who traveled along them, and with whom they did business. Whenever trade routes appear in World History, watch for the four M's: merchants, militaries, missionaries,
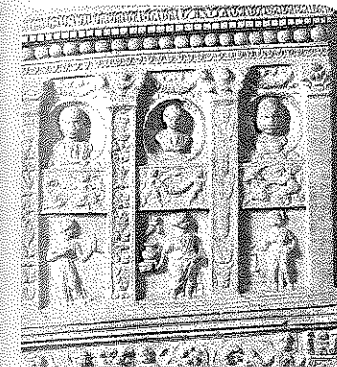


and migrants. Trade routes allow the transport of much more than just merchandise across regions. Interregional trade is an enormously important theme in AP World History, and you will be asked about it over and over again on the AP exam.

Pay particular attention when nomadic/pastoralist peoples are mentioned. They often functioned as the "truckers" of the trade routes and were important links in commercial networks—they also occasionally invaded the empires. Watch also for unintended consequences of movement along the trade routes. Diseases hitchhiked with the travelers and their goods, and periodically wreaked havoc. Epidemics, or even pandemics, broke out in most of the major empires in the later dates of this period and contributed to the destruction of the Han Chinese, Roman, and Gupta empires.

Many of the social structures that began in the first urban-based societies continue in the classical era. Imperial societies were all patriarchal (controlled by men, believing that men were superior to women) and hierarchical (ordered like a ladder, from top to bottom). These social structures solidified in classical empires and became "traditional" in later periods. Governments and religions supported these divisions. If you lived in a classical imperial society, you were identified with a specific social class, and you knew perfectly well who was above you and who was below you on the social scale. Classical civilizations divided their societies into groups of landowners, unskilled workers, artisans (skilled craftsmen), merchants, military and government bureaucrats, and slaves (unfree labor) of some sort. The order of significant classes, however, could vary. In Han China, for example, merchants were not considered middle class; and in Mauryan and Gupta India, the priestly class ranked higher than rulers and warriors. As you read about each classical society, be sure you understand how their social structure was organized; how religions

reinforced these social structures; if there was something unique about a particular society's way of organizing its people into classes; and the responsibilities of, and taxes owed, by each social class. And take particular note of the conflict between the classes—it was often the conflicts that were partially responsible for toppling these empires.

In the foundations era, we saw societies develop religions and belief systems to explain the natural world around them: animism, shamanism, polytheism, ancestor worship (veneration), and the early phases of what developed into Hinduism and Judaism. Judaism and Hinduism continued to mature so that by the end of the classical era believers had common sets of practices, scriptures, and beliefs. Historians say that the religions were "codified." Along with older belief systems, new belief systems emerged that remain significant today: Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Christianity. In AP World History, we see these abiding religions and beliefs begin to develop, and we wait until the postclassical era (the early part of AP World History Period 3) to see them spread beyond the boundaries of their homelands by the four M's on the trade routes.

Each of the classical societies or civilizations developed distinct, unique, cultural traditions that endured long past the demise of the empire. The buildings in Washington, D.C., for example, reflect the influence of Greco-Roman architecture, and the hopes of being just as great as that culture. A society's art, architecture, drama, and sculpture tell historians a great deal about a society's values, beliefs, interests, and technological abilities. These cultural "documents" sometimes give us a glimpse into the human side of a long-dead society: its sense of humor, for example, or its standards of beauty. These cultural documents also provide examples when historians look for evidence of one society learning and adopting information or styles from another society. We watch merchants bring their religious ideas to new places along their trade routes, and then the local people often integrating their old beliefs with new ones, a process called syncretism (blending). Historians find evidence of this syncretism in buildings and artwork as well as written works. The AP exam may use a photograph or a quotation from a classical empire to ask you questions about the values of the empire itself, or about cultural syncretism evident in a particular work of art.

| AP | THINKING ABOUT THEMES |
|---|---|

1. *What were some of the features common to most of the classical societies?*
2. *In what ways do the legacies of the classical societies continue to influence the world's peoples?*

# The Empires of Persia

# chapter7

## AP KEY CONCEPTS

**2.2.I:** The number and size of key states and empires grew dramatically as rulers imposed political unity on areas where previously there had been competing states.

**2.2.II:** Empires and states developed new techniques of imperial administration based, in part, on the success of earlier political forms.

**2.2.III:** Unique social and economic dimensions developed in imperial societies in Afro-Eurasia and the Americas.

**2.3.III:** Alongside the trade in goods, the exchange of people, technology, religious and cultural beliefs, food crops, domesticated animals, and disease pathogens developed across extensive networks of communication and exchange.

## AP HISTORICAL THINKING

**Interpretation** Understand how and why the Persian rulers created administrative institutions and the techniques they deployed to maintain their empires.

**Causation and Comparison** Understand the religious belief of Zoroastrianism and its influence on Christianity and Islam.

**Contextualization** Understand how one of the Persian empires grew dramatically by imposing political unity on areas where previously there had been competing states.

**Interpretation and Synthesis** Understand the reasons for the decline, collapse, and transformation of one of the Persian empires into a successor empire.

## AP CHAPTER FOCUS

There are four Persian empires discussed in this chapter: the Achaemenid, the Seleucid, the Parthian, and the Sasanid. In total, these Persian empires lasted over a thousand years and

ruled the Middle East. For the AP exam purposes, you only have to know about one of these empires in depth and be able to use it as an example of a classical empire on a free-response question.

The first half of this chapter covers the history of the governments of the Persian empires, and the second half is about the commonalities of Persian culture. Your job is to look for the political and economic structures that the four empires built, and then to understand the traditions of Persian society and culture.

Achaemenid Persia sets the stage for Persian rule. You will need to be able to explain the administrative (government) policies that Persians continued from the Mesopotamians, as well as what the Persians did to control and manage a huge empire. Government policies include functions of protection (military, defensive walls, roads), legal institutions (laws, courts, enforcements), and the crucial collecting of taxes to pay for it all. Once you understand the government policies of the Persian empires, you can use them as a template for the other classical empires as you make comparisons and look for continuities and changes across time periods. If a chart was helpful in understanding the earliest civilizations, you should create one for the classical empires in AP World History Period 2.

Be sure to examine the chapter maps. The Persian empires were in the middle of Afro-Eurasia and connected to other empires by land and water routes—the most famous being the Silk Roads. In many ways, Persian empires were the center of trade and cultural diffusion.

Expect to see some or all of the following on an AP exam: the royal road, functions of the city of Persepolis, technology of *qanats,* administrative devices of satraps and satrapies, legacies of Zoroastrianism, Hellenistic influences, nomadic incursions of Parthians, participation on Silk Roads/routes, and cultural syncretism.

## EYEWITNESS:

# King Croesus and the Tricky Business of Predicting the Future

Greek historian Herodotus relished a good story, and he related many a tale about the Persian empire and its conflicts with other peoples, including Greeks. One story had to do with a struggle between Cyrus, leader of the expanding Persian realm, and Croesus, ruler of the powerful and wealthy kingdom of Lydia in southwestern Anatolia. Croesus was concerned about the growing Persian influence and asked the Greek oracle at Delphi whether to go to war against Cyrus. The oracle, who had a reputation for delivering ambiguous predictions, responded that an attack on Cyrus would destroy a great kingdom.

**Cyrus** (SIGH-ruhs)
**Croesus** (CREE-suhs)
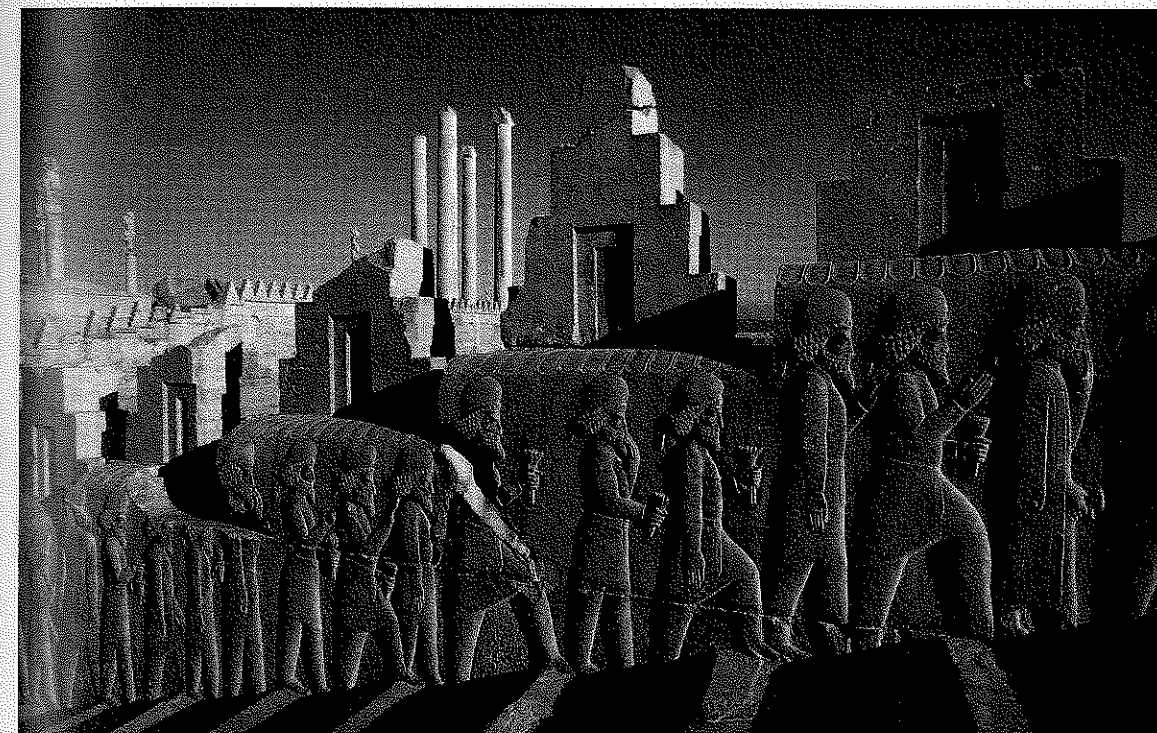


A procession of envoys with offerings for the king makes its way up a ceremonial stairway in the ancient city of Persepolis in modern Iran, one of four capitals of the Achaemenid Persian empire.

Overjoyed, Croesus lined up his allies and prepared for war. In 546 B.C.E. he launched an invasion and seized a small town, provoking Cyrus to engage the formidable Lydian cavalry. The resulting battle was hard fought but inconclusive. Because winter was approaching, Croesus disbanded his troops and returned to his capital at Sardis, expecting Cyrus to retreat as well. But Cyrus was a vigorous and unpredictable warrior, and he pursued Croesus to Sardis. When he learned of the pursuit, Croesus hastily assembled an army to confront the invaders. Cyrus thwarted Croesus's strategy, however, by advancing a group of warriors mounted on camels that spooked the Lydian horses and sent them into headlong flight. Cyrus's army then surrounded Sardis and took the city after a siege of only two weeks. Narrowly escaping death in the battle, Croesus was taken captive and later became an advisor to Cyrus. Herodotus could not resist pointing out that events did, indeed, prove the Delphic oracle correct: Croesus's attack on Cyrus led to the destruction of a great kingdom—his own.

Classical Persian society began to take shape during the sixth century B.C.E. when warriors conquered the region from the Indus River to Egypt and southeastern Europe. Their conquests yielded an enormous realm much larger than the earlier Babylonian or Assyrian empires. The very size of the Persian empire created political and administrative problems for its rulers. Once they solved those problems, however, a series of Persian-based empires governed much of the territory between India and the Mediterranean Sea for more than a millennium—from the mid-sixth century B.C.E. until the early seventh century C.E.—and brought centralized political organization to many distinct peoples living over vast geographic spaces.

The Persian victory over Lydia was a major turning point in the development of the Persian empire. Lydia had a reputation as a kingdom of fabulous wealth, partly because it was the first land to use standardized coins with values guaranteed by the state. Taking advantage of its coins and its geographic location on the Mediterranean, Lydia conducted maritime trade with Greece, Egypt, and Phoenicia as well as overland trade with Mesopotamia and Persia. Lydian wealth and resources gave Cyrus tremendous momentum as he extended Persian authority to new lands and built the earliest of the vast imperial states of classical times.

**MAP 7.1**
**The Achaemenid and Seleucid empires, 558–330 B.C.E. and 323–83 B.C.E.**
Observe how much larger the Achaemenid and Seleucid empires were compared to the earlier Mesopotamian and Egyptian empires discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

*What role did the Royal Road and other highways play in the maintenance of the Achaemenid empire?*

# THE PERSIAN EMPIRES

The empires of Persia arose in the arid land of Iran. For centuries Iran had developed under the shadow of the wealthier and more productive Mesopotamia to the west while absorbing intermittent migrations and invasions of nomadic peoples coming out of central Asia to the northeast. During the sixth century B.C.E., rulers of the province of Persia in southwestern Iran embarked on a series of conquests that resulted in the formation of an enormous empire. For more than a millennium, four ruling dynasties—the **Achaemenids** (558–330 B.C.E.), the Seleucids (323–83 B.C.E.), the Parthians (247 B.C.E.–224 C.E.), and the Sasanids (224–651 C.E.)—maintained a continuous tradition of imperial rule in much of southwest Asia.
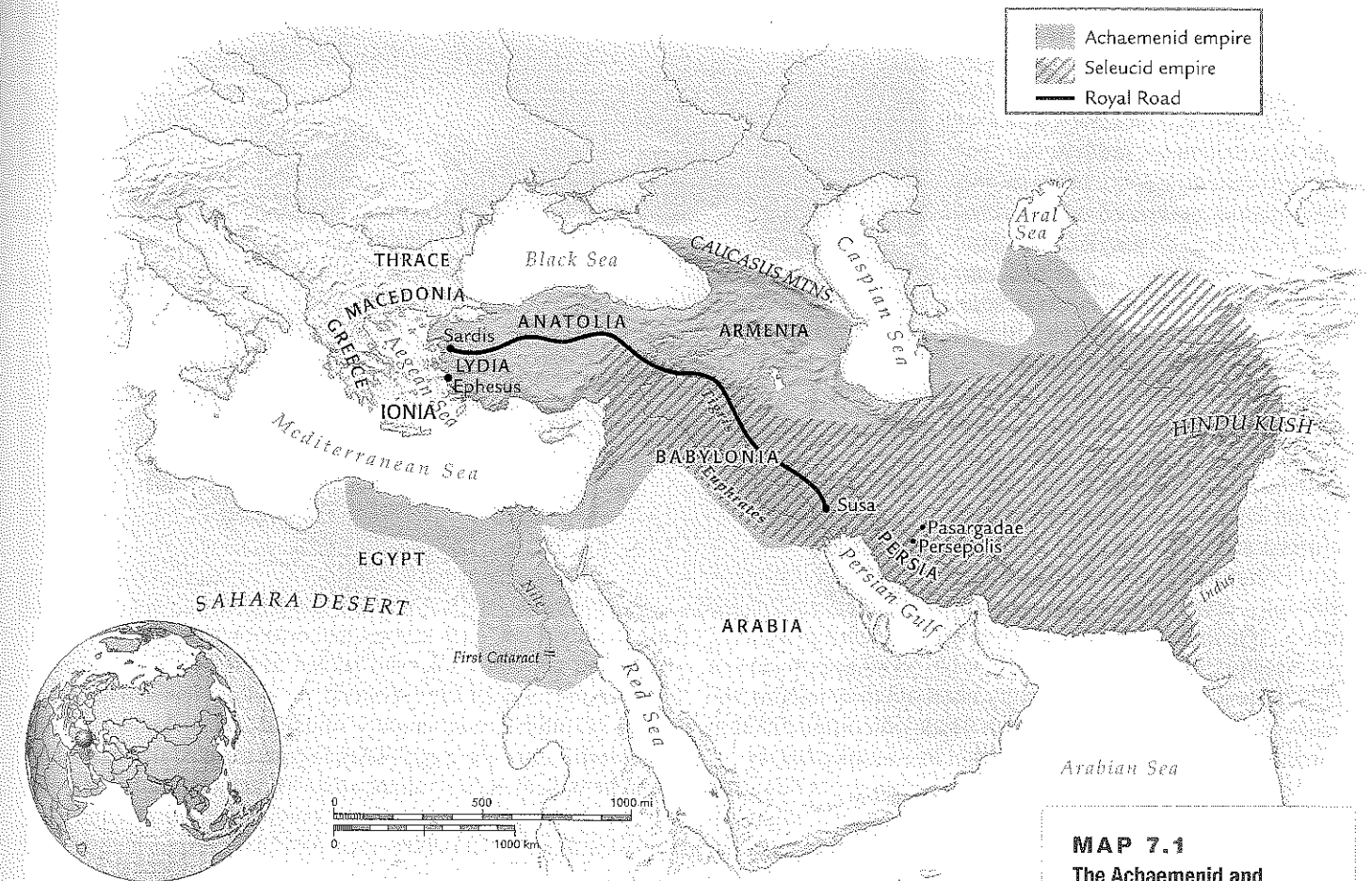
## The Achaemenid Empire

**The Medes and the Persians** The origins of classical Persian society trace back to the late stages of Mesopotamian society. During the centuries before 1000 B.C.E., two closely related peoples known as the **Medes** and the Persians migrated from central Asia to Persia (the southwestern portion of the modern-day state of Iran), where they lived in loose subjection to the Babylonian and Assyrian empires. The Medes and the

Persians spoke Indo-European languages, and their movements were part of the larger Indo-European migrations. They shared many cultural traits with their distant cousins, the Aryans, who migrated into India. They were mostly pastoralists, although they also practiced a limited amount of agriculture. They organized themselves by clans rather than by states or formal political institutions, but they recognized leaders who collected taxes and delivered tribute to their Mesopotamian overlords.

Though not tightly organized politically, the Medes and the Persians were peoples of considerable military power. As descendants of nomadic peoples from central Asia, they possessed the equestrian skills common to many steppe peoples. They were expert archers, even when mounted on their horses, and they frequently raided the wealthy lands of Mesopotamia. When the Assyrian and Babylonian empires weakened in the sixth century B.C.E., the Medes and the Persians embarked on a vastly successful imperial venture of their own.

**Cyrus** Cyrus the Achaemenid (reigned 558–530 B.C.E.) launched the Persians' imperial venture. In some ways Cyrus was an unlikely candidate for that role. He came from a mountainous region of southwestern Iran, and in reference to the region's economy, his contemporaries often called him Cyrus the Shepherd. Yet Cyrus proved to be a tough, wily leader and an outstanding military strategist. His conquests laid the foundation of the first Persian empire, also known as the

Achaemenid empire because its rulers claimed descent from Cyrus's Achaemenid clan.

**Cyrus's Conquests** In 558 B.C.E. Cyrus became king of the Persian tribes, which he ruled from his mountain fortress at **Pasargadae.** In 553 B.C.E. he initiated a rebellion against his Median overlord, whom he crushed within three years. By 548 B.C.E. he had brought all of Iran under his control, and he began to look for opportunities to expand his influence. In 546 B.C.E. he conquered the powerful kingdom of Lydia in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). Between 545 B.C.E. and 539 B.C.E., he campaigned in central Asia and Bactria (modern Afghanistan). In a swift campaign of 539 B.C.E., he seized Babylonia, whose vassal states immediately recognized him as their lord. Within twenty years Cyrus went from minor regional king to ruler of an empire that stretched from India to the borders of Egypt.

Cyrus no doubt would have mounted a campaign against Egypt, the largest and wealthiest neighboring state outside his control, had he lived long enough. But in 530 B.C.E. he fell, mortally wounded, while protecting his northeastern frontier from nomadic raiders. His troops recovered his body and

placed it in a simple tomb, which still stands, that Cyrus had prepared for himself at his palace in Pasargadae.

**Darius** Cyrus's empire survived and expanded during the reigns of his successors. His son **Cambyses** (reigned 530–522 B.C.E.) conquered Egypt in 525 B.C.E. and brought its wealth into Persian hands. The greatest of the Achaemenid emperors, **Darius** (reigned 521–486 B.C.E.), extended the empire both east and west. His armies pushed into northwestern India as far as the Indus River, absorbing parts of northern India, while also capturing Thrace, Macedonia, and the western coast of the Black Sea in southeastern Europe. By the late sixth century,

Achaemenid (ah-KEE-muh-nid)
Medes (meeds)

Pasargadae (pah-SAR-gah-dee)
Cambyses (kam-BIE-sees)

Darius presided over an empire stretching some 3,000 kilometers (1,865 miles) from the Indus River in the east to the **Aegean** Sea in the west and 1,500 kilometers (933 miles) from Armenia in the north to the first cataract of the Nile River in the south. This empire embraced mountains, valleys, plateaus, jungles, deserts, and arable land, and it touched the shores of the Arabian Sea, Aral Sea, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea, Black Sea, Red Sea, and Mediterranean Sea. With a population of some thirty-five million, Darius's realm was by far the largest empire the world had yet seen.


The tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae—one of the few Achaemenid monuments that have survived to the present.

Yet Darius was more important as an administrator than as a conqueror. Governing a far-flung empire was a much more difficult challenge than conquering it. The Achaemenid rulers presided over more than seventy distinct ethnic groups, including peoples who lived in widely scattered regions, spoke many different languages, and observed a profusion of religious and cultural traditions. To maintain their empire, the Achaemenids needed to establish lines of communication with all parts of their realm and design institutions that would enable them to tax and administer their territories. In doing so, they not only made it possible for the Achaemenid empire to survive but also pioneered administrative techniques that would outlast their dynasty and influence political life in southwestern Asia for centuries to come.

**Persepolis** Soon after his rise to power, Darius began to centralize his administration. About 520 B.C.E. he started to build a new capital of astonishing magnificence at **Persepolis,** near Pasargadae. Darius intended Persepolis to serve not only as an administrative center but also as a monument to the Achaemenid dynasty. Structures at Persepolis included vast reception halls, lavish royal residences, and a well-protected treasury. From the time of Darius to the end of the Achaemenid dynasty in 330 B.C.E., Persepolis served as the nerve center of the Persian empire—a resplendent capital bustling with advisors, ministers, diplomats, scribes, accountants, translators, and bureaucratic officers of all descriptions. Even today, massive columns and other ruins bespeak the grandeur of Darius's capital.

**Achaemenid Administration: The Satrapies** The government of the Achaemenid empire depended on a finely tuned balance between central initiative and local administration. The Achaemenid rulers made great claims to authority in their official title—"The Great King, King of Kings, King in
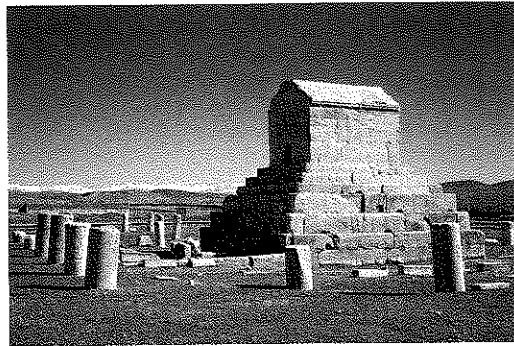
Persia, King of Countries." Like their Mesopotamian predecessors, the Achaemenids appointed governors (called *satraps*) to serve as agents of the central administration and oversee affairs in the various regions. Darius divided his realm into twenty-three **satrapies**—administrative and taxation districts governed by satraps. Yet the Achaemenids did not try to push direct rule on their subjects: most of the satraps were Persians, but the Achaemenids recruited local officials to fill almost all administrative posts below the level of the satrap.

Because the satraps often held posts distant from Persepolis, there was always a possibility that they might ally with local groups and become independent of Achaemenid authority or even threaten the empire itself. The Achaemenid rulers relied on two measures to discourage that possibility. First, each satrapy had a contingent of military officers and tax collectors who served as checks on the satraps' power and independence. Second, the rulers created a new category of officials—essentially imperial spies—known as "the eyes and ears of the king." These agents traveled throughout the empire with their own military forces conducting surprise audits of accounts and procedures in the provinces and collecting intelligence reports. The division of provincial responsibilities and the institution of the eyes and ears of the king helped the Achaemenid rulers maintain control over a vast empire that otherwise might easily have split into a series of independent regional kingdoms.

**Taxes, Coins, and Laws** Darius also sought to improve administrative efficiency by regularizing tax levies and standardizing laws. Cyrus and Cambyses had accepted periodic "gifts" of tribute from subject lands and cities. Though often lavish, the gifts did not provide a consistent and reliable source of income for rulers who needed to finance a large bureaucracy and army. Darius replaced irregular tribute payments with formal tax levies. He required each satrapy to pay a set quantity of silver—and in some cases a levy of horses or slaves as well—deliverable annually to the imperial court. Darius followed the example of the Lydian king Croesus and issued standardized coins—a move that fostered trade. In an equally important initiative begun in the year 520 B.C.E., he sought to bring the many legal systems of his empire closer to a single standard. He did not abolish the existing laws of individual lands or peoples, nor did he impose a uniform law code on his entire empire. But he directed legal experts to study and codify the laws of his subject peoples, modifying them when necessary to harmonize them with the legal principles observed in the empire as a whole.


Ruins of Persepolis, showing the imperial reception hall and palaces. The columns rise about 19 meters (62 feet) and once supported a massive roof.

**Roads and Communications** Alongside their administrative and legal policies, the Achaemenid rulers took other measures to knit their far-flung realm into a coherent whole. They built good roads across their realm, notably the so-called **Persian Royal Road**—parts of it paved with stone—that stretched about 2,575 kilometers (1,600 miles) from the Aegean port of Ephesus to Sardis in Anatolia, through Mesopotamia along the Tigris River, to Susa in Iran, with an extension to Pasargadae and Persepolis. Caravans took some ninety days to travel this road, lodging at inns along the well-policed route.

The imperial government also organized a courier service and built 111 postal stations at intervals of 40 to 50 kilometers (25 to 30 miles) along the Royal Road. Each station kept a supply of fresh horses and food rations for couriers, who sometimes traveled at night as well as during daylight hours. Scholars estimate that these couriers were able to carry urgent messages from one end of the Royal Road to the other in two weeks' time. The Greek historian Herodotus spoke highly of these imperial servants, and even today the United States Postal Service takes his description of their efforts as a standard for its employees: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." The Achaemenids also improved existing routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt, and they built new roads linking Persia with northern India, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt. In combination, these imperial highways stretched approximately 13,000 kilometers (8,000 miles). In addition to improving communications, these roads facilitated trade, which helped to integrate the empire's various regions into a larger economy.

## Decline of the Achaemenid Empire

**The Achaemenid Commonwealth** The Achaemenids' roads and administrative machinery enabled them to govern a vast empire and extend Persian influences throughout their territories. Political stability made it possible to undertake extensive public works projects such as the construction of *qanat* (underground canals), which led to enhanced agricultural production and population growth. Iron metallurgy spread to all parts of the empire, and by the end of the Achaemenid dynasty, iron tools were common in Persian agricultural communities. Peoples in the various regions of the Achaemenid empire maintained their ethnic identities, but all participated in a larger Persian commonwealth.

Eventually, however, difficulties between rulers and subject peoples undermined the integrity of the Achaemenid empire. Cyrus and Darius both consciously pursued a policy of toleration in administering their vast multicultural empire: they took care to respect the values and cultural traditions of the peoples they ruled. In Mesopotamia, for example, they did not portray themselves as Persian conquerors but, rather, as legitimate Babylonian rulers and representatives of Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon. Darius also won high

*Persepolis* (per-SEP-uh-lis)

*qanat* (kah-NAHT)

praise from Jews in the Achaemenid empire, since he allowed them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple that Babylonian conquerors had destroyed in 587 B.C.E.

Darius's successor, Xerxes (reigned 486–465 B.C.E.), had more difficult relations with subject peoples. The burden of Persian rule became particularly heavy in Mesopotamia and Egypt—regions with sophisticated cultural traditions and long histories of independence—and subject peoples there frequently rose up in rebellion. Xerxes did not seek to impose specifically Persian values in Mesopotamia and Egypt, but he harshly repressed rebellions and thereby gained a reputation for cruelty and insensitivity to the concerns of subject peoples.

**The Persian Wars** The Achaemenids had an especially difficult time with their ethnic Greek subjects. Greeks inhabited many of the cities in Anatolia—particularly in the region of Ionia on the Aegean coast of western Anatolia—and they maintained close economic and commercial ties with their cousins in the peninsula of Greece itself. The Ionian Greeks fell under Persian domination during the reign of Cyrus. They became restive under Darius's Persian governors—"tyrants," the Greeks called them—who oversaw their affairs. In 500 B.C.E. the Ionian cities rebelled, expelled or executed their governors, and asserted their independence. Their rebellion launched a series of conflicts that Greeks called the Persian Wars (500–479 B.C.E.).

The conflict between the Ionian Greeks and the Persians expanded when the cities of peninsular Greece sent fleets to aid their kinsmen in Ionia. Darius managed to put down the rebellion and reassert Achaemenid authority, but he and his successors became entangled in a difficult and ultimately destructive effort to extend their authority to the Greek peninsula. In 490 B.C.E. Darius attempted to forestall future problems by mounting an expedition to conquer the wealthy Greek cities and absorb them into his empire. Though larger and much more powerful than the forces of the disunited Greek city-states, the Persian army had to contend with long and fragile lines of supply as well as a hostile environment. After some initial successes, the Persians suffered a rout at the **battle of Marathon** (490 B.C.E.), and they returned home without achieving their goals. Xerxes sent another expedition ten years later, but within eighteen months, it too had suffered defeat both on land (famously at Thermopylae) and at sea and had returned to Persia.

For almost 150 years the Persian empire sparred intermittently with the Greek cities. The adversaries mounted small expeditions against each other, attacking individual cities or fleets, but they did not engage in large-scale campaigns. The Greek cities were too small and disunited to pose a serious challenge to the enormous Persian empire. Meanwhile, for their part, the later Achaemenids had to concentrate on the other restive and sometimes rebellious regions of their empire and could not embark on new rounds of expansion.

**Alexander of Macedon** The standoff ended with the rise of **Alexander of Macedon,** often called Alexander the Great (discussed more fully in chapter 10). In 334 B.C.E. Alexander invaded Persia with an army of some forty-eight thousand tough, battle-hardened Macedonians. Though far smaller than the Persian army in numbers, the well-disciplined Macedonians carried heavier arms and employed more sophisticated military tactics than their opponents. As a result, they sliced through the Persian empire, advancing almost at will and dealing their adversaries a series of devastating defeats. In 331 B.C.E. Alexander shattered Achaemenid forces at the battle of **Gaugamela,** and within a year the empire founded by Cyrus the Shepherd had dissolved.

Alexander led his forces into Persepolis, confiscated the wealth stored in the imperial treasury, paid his respects at the tomb of Cyrus in Pasargadae, and proclaimed himself heir to the Achaemenid rulers. After a brief season of celebration, Alexander and his forces ignited a blaze—perhaps intentionally—that destroyed Persepolis. The conflagration was so great that when archaeologists first began to explore the ruins of Persepolis in the eighteenth century, they found layers of ash and charcoal up to 1 meter (3 feet) deep.

The Achaemenid empire had crumbled, but its legacy was by no means exhausted. Alexander portrayed himself in Persia and Egypt as a legitimate successor of the Achaemenids who observed their precedents and deserved their honors. He retained the Achaemenid administrative structure, and he even confirmed the appointments of many satraps and other officials. As it happened, Alexander had little time to enjoy his conquests, because he died in 323 B.C.E. after a brief effort to extend his empire to India. But the states that succeeded him—the Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanid empires—continued to employ a basically Achaemenid structure of imperial administration.

## The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanid Empires

**The Seleucids** After Alexander died, his chief generals fought among themselves and struggled to take over the conqueror's realms. In Persia the victor was Seleucus, formerly commander of an elite guard corps in Alexander's army, who dominated the territories of the former Achaemenid empire and ruled them from 305 to 281 B.C.E. Like Alexander, Seleucus and his successors retained the Achaemenid systems of administration and taxation as well as the imperial roads and postal service. The **Seleucids** also founded new cities throughout the realm and attracted Greek colonists to occupy them. The migrants, who represented only a small fraction of the whole population of the empire, largely adapted to their new environment. Nonetheless, the establishment of cities greatly stimulated trade and economic development both within the Seleucid empire and beyond.
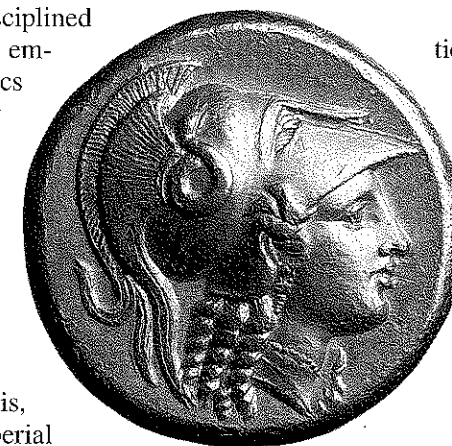
A gold coin from the early Hellenistic era depicting the Macedonian conqueror, Alexander.

As foreigners, the Seleucids faced opposition from native Persians and especially their ruling classes. Satraps often revolted against Seleucid rule, or at least worked to build power bases that would enable them to establish their independence. The Seleucids soon lost their holdings in northern India, and the seminomadic Parthians progressively took over Iran during the third century B.C.E. The Seleucids continued to rule a truncated empire until 83 B.C.E., when Roman conquerors put an end to their empire.

**The Parthians** Meanwhile, the **Parthians** established themselves as rulers of a powerful empire based in Iran that they extended to wealthy Mesopotamia. The Parthians had occupied the region of eastern Iran around Khurasan since Achae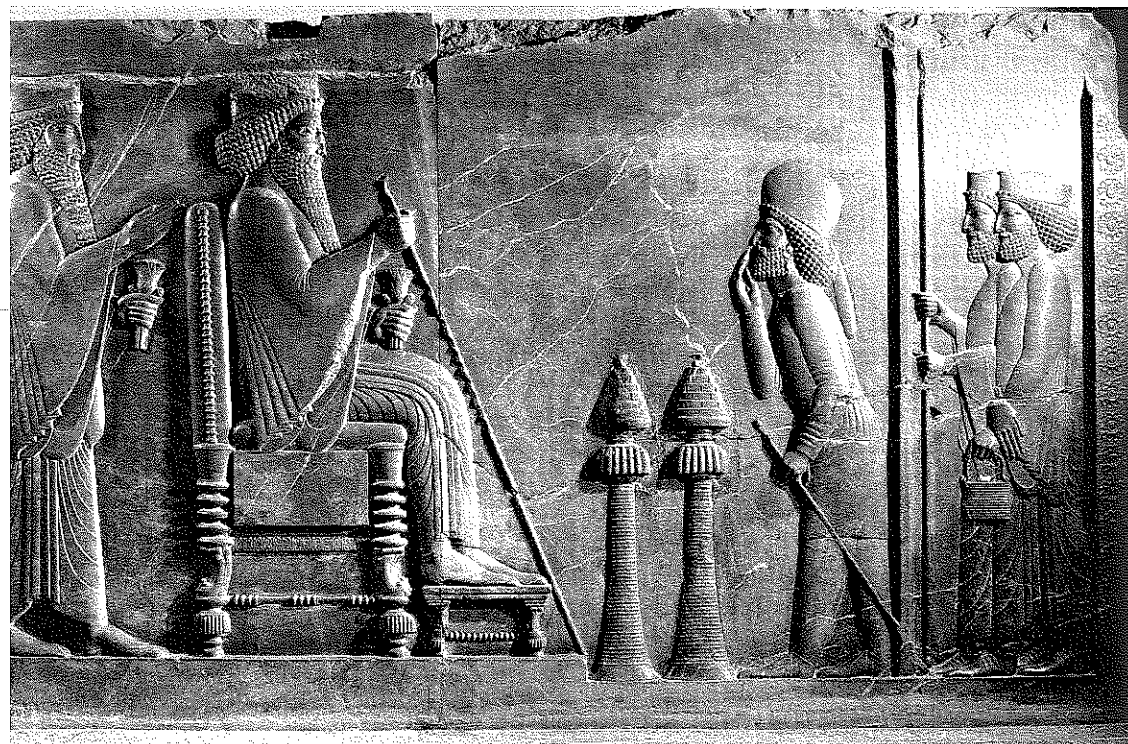menid times. They retained many of the customs and traditions of nomadic peoples from the steppes of central Asia. They did not have a centralized government, for example, but organized themselves politically through a federation of leaders who met in councils and jointly determined policy for all allied groups. They were skillful warriors, accustomed to defending themselves against constant threats from nomadic peoples farther east.

As they settled and turned increasingly to agriculture, the Parthians also devised an effective means to resist nomadic invasions. Because they had no access to feed grains, nomadic peoples allowed their horses to forage for food on the steppes during the winter. The Parthians discovered that if they fed their horses on alfalfa during the winter, their animals would grow much larger and stronger than the small horses and ponies of the steppes. Their larger animals could then support heavily armed warriors outfitted with metal armor, which served as an effective shield against the arrows of the steppe nomads. Well-trained forces of heavily armed cavalry could usually put nomadic raiding parties to flight. Indeed, few existing forces could stand up to Parthian heavy cavalry.

**Parthian Conquests** As early as the third century B.C.E., the Parthians began to wrest their independence from the Seleucids. The Parthian satrap revolted against his Seleucid overlord in 238 B.C.E., and during the following decades his successors gradually enlarged their holdings. **Mithradates I,** the Parthians' greatest conqueror, came to the throne about 171 B.C.E. and transformed his state into a mighty empire. By about 155 B.C.E. he had consolidated his hold on Iran and had also extended Parthian rule to Mesopotamia.

Stone carving from Persepolis showing an enthroned Darius (with his son Xerxes standing behind him) receiving a high court official, as incense burners perfume the air. In what ways does the official's posture indicate respect for and submission to the emperor?

**Seleucids** (sih-LOO-sihds)
**Mithradates** (mihth-rah-DAY-teez)

Gold sculpture of a nomadic horseman discharging an arrow. This figurine dates from the fifth or fourth century B.C.E. and might well represent a Parthian.

**Parthian Government**  The Parthians portrayed themselves as enemies of the foreign Seleucids, as restorers of rule in the Persian tradition. To some extent, that characterization was accurate. The Parthians largely followed the example of the Achaemenids in structuring their empire: they governed through satraps, employed Achaemenid techniques of administration and taxation, and built a capital city at **Ctesiphon** on the Euphrates River near modern Baghdad. But the Parthians also retained elements of their steppe traditions. They did not develop nearly so centralized a regime as the Achaemenids or the Seleucids but, rather, vested a great deal of authority and responsibility in their clan leaders. These men often served as satraps, and they regularly worked to build independent bases of power in their regions. They frequently mounted rebellions against the imperial government, though without much success.

For about three centuries the Parthians presided over a powerful empire between India and the Mediterranean. Beginning in the first century C.E., they faced pressure in the west from the expanding Roman empire. The Parthian empire as a whole never stood in danger of falling to the Romans, but on three occasions in the second century C.E. Roman armies captured the Parthian capital at Ctesiphon. Combined with

Ctesiphon (TES-uh-phon)
Sasanids (suh-SAH-nids)

internal difficulties caused by the rebellious satraps, Roman pressure contributed to the weakening of the Parthian state. During the early third century C.E., internal rebellion brought it down.

**The Sasanids**  Once again, though, the tradition of imperial rule continued, this time under the **Sasanids,** who came from Persia and claimed direct descent from the Achaemenids. The Sasanids toppled the Parthians in 224 C.E. and ruled until 651 C.E., re-creating much of the splendor of the Achaemenid empire. From their cosmopolitan capital at Ctesiphon, the Sasanid "king of kings" provided strong rule from Parthia to Mesopotamia while also rebuilding an elaborate system of administration and founding or refurbishing numerous cities. Sasanid merchants traded actively with peoples to both east and west, and they introduced into Iran the cultivation of crops such as rice, sugarcane, citrus fruits, eggplant, and cotton that came west over the trade routes from India and China.

During the reign of Shapur I (239–272 C.E.), the Sasanids stabilized their western frontier and created a series of buffer states between themselves and the Roman empire. Shapur even defeated several Roman armies and settled the prisoners in Iran, where they devoted their famous engineering skills to the construction of roads and dams. After Shapur, the Sasanids did not expand militarily, but entered into a standoff relationship with remnants of the Kushan empire in the east and the Roman and Byzantine empires in the west. None of those large empires was strong enough to overcome the others, but they contested border areas and buffer states, sometimes engaging in lengthy and bitter disputes that sapped the energies of all involved.

These continual conflicts seriously weakened the Sasanid empire in particular. The empire came to an end in 651 C.E. when Arab warriors killed the last Sasanid ruler, overran his realm, and incorporated it into their rapidly expanding Islamic empire. Yet even conquest by external invaders did not end the legacy of classical Persia, since Persian administrative techniques and cultural traditions were so powerful that the Arab conquerors adopted them to use in building a new Islamic society.

# IMPERIAL SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

Throughout the eastern hemisphere during the classical era, public life and social structure became much more complicated than they had been during the days of the early complex societies. Centralized imperial governments needed large numbers of administrative officials, which led to the emergence of educated classes of bureaucrats. Stable empires enabled many individuals to engage in one or other specialized labor as artisans, craftsmen, or professionals of various kinds. Some of them accumulated vast wealth, which led to increased distance and tensions between rich and poor. Meanwhile, slavery became more common than in earlier times. The prominence of slavery had to do partly with the expansion of

imperial states, which often enslaved conquered foes, but it also reflected the increasing gulf between rich and poor, which placed such great economic pressure on some individuals that they had to give up their freedom in order to survive. All those developments had implications for the social structures of classical societies in Persia as well as China, India, and the Mediterranean basin.

## Social Development in Classical Persia

During the early days of the Achaemenid empire, Persian society reflected its origins on the steppes of central Asia. When the Medes and the Persians migrated to Iran, their social structure was similar to that of the Aryans in India, consisting primarily of warriors, priests, and peasants. For centuries, while they lived on the periphery and in the shadow of the Mesopotamian empires, the Medes and the Persians maintained steppe traditions. Even after the establishment of the Achaemenid empire, some of them followed a seminomadic lifestyle and maintained ties with their cousins on the steppes. Family and clan relationships were extremely important in the organization of Persian political and social affairs. Noble warriors headed the clans, which retained much of their influence long after [...]

**Imperial Bureaucrats**  The development of a cosmopolitan empire, however, brought considerable complexity to Persian society. The requirements of imperial administration, for example, called for a new class of educated bureaucrats who to a large extent undermined the position of the old warrior elite. The bureaucrats did not directly challenge the patriarchal warriors and certainly did not seek to displace them from their privileged position in society. Nevertheless, the bureaucrats' crucial role in running the day-to-day affairs of the empire guaranteed them a prominent and comfortable place in Persian society. By the time of the later Achaemenids and the Seleucids, Persian cities were home to masses of administrators, tax collectors, and record keepers. The bureaucracy even included a substantial corps of translators, who facili[...]

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**MAP 7.2**

**The Parthian and Sasanid empires, 247 B.C.E.–651 C.E.**

Note the location of the Parthian and Sasanid empires between the Mediterranean Sea and northern India.

*What roles did these two empires play in facilitating or hindering communications between lands to their east and west?*



Parthian empire
Sasanid empire
Overlapping territory of the two empires