



# The Persian Empire

## MAIN IDEA

**EMPIRE BUILDING** By governing with tolerance and wisdom, the Persians established a well-ordered empire that lasted for 200 years.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Leaders today try to follow the Persian example of tolerance and wise government.

## TERMS & NAMES

- Cyrus
- Cambyses
- Darius
- satrap
- Royal Road
- Zoroaster

**SETTING THE STAGE** The Medes, along with the Chaldeans and others, helped to overthrow the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C. The Medes marched to Nineveh from their homeland in the area of present-day northern Iran. Meanwhile, the Medes' close neighbor to the south, Persia, began to expand its horizons and territorial ambitions.

## The Rise of Persia

The Assyrians employed military force to control a vast empire. In contrast, the Persians based their empire on tolerance and diplomacy. They relied on a strong military to back up their policies. Ancient Persia included what today is Iran.

**The Persian Homeland** Indo-Europeans first migrated from Central Europe and southern Russia to the mountains and plateaus east of the Fertile Crescent around 1000 B.C. This area extended from the Caspian Sea in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south. (See the map on page 101.) In addition to fertile farmland, ancient Iran boasted a wealth of minerals. These included copper, lead, gold, silver, and gleaming blue lapis lazuli. A thriving trade in these minerals put the settlers in contact with their neighbors to the east and the west.

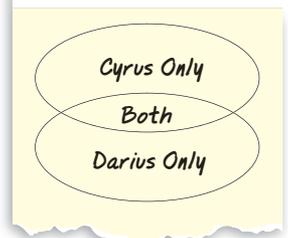
At first, dozens of tiny kingdoms occupied the region. Eventually two major powers emerged: the Medes and the Persians. In time, a remarkable ruler would lead Persia to dominate the Medes and found a huge empire.

**Cyrus the Great Finds an Empire** The rest of the world paid little attention to the Persians until 550 B.C. In that year, **Cyrus** (SY•ruhs), Persia's king, began to conquer several neighboring kingdoms. Cyrus was a military genius, leading his army from victory to victory between 550 and 539 B.C. In time, Cyrus controlled an empire that spanned 2,000 miles, from the Indus River in the east to Anatolia in the west.

Even more than his military genius, though, Cyrus's most enduring legacy was his method of governing. His kindness toward conquered peoples revealed a wise and tolerant view of empire. For example, when Cyrus's army marched into a city, his generals prevented Persian soldiers from looting and burning. Unlike other conquerors, Cyrus believed in honoring local customs and religions. Instead of destroying the local temple, Cyrus would kneel there to pray.

## TAKING NOTES

**Comparing and Contrasting** Use a diagram to identify the similarities and differences between Cyrus and Darius.



Cyrus also allowed the Jews, who had been driven from their homeland by the Babylonians, to return to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. Under Persian rule, the Jews rebuilt their city and temple. The Jews were forever grateful to Cyrus, whom they considered one of God’s anointed ones. The Hebrew prophet Ezra tells of Cyrus’s kindness:

#### PRIMARY SOURCE

This is the word of Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he himself has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. To every man of his people now among you I say, God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord the God of Israel, the God whose city is Jerusalem.

EZRA 1: 2–3 (Bible)

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Summarizing

**A** What are some examples of Cyrus’s tolerant method of governing?

Cyrus was killed as he fought nomadic invaders on the eastern border of his empire. According to the Greek historian Arrian, his simple, house-shaped tomb bore these words: “O man, I am Cyrus the son of Cambyses. I established the Persian Empire and was king of Asia. Do not begrudge me my memorial.” **A**

## Persian Rule

The task of unifying conquered territories fell to rulers who followed Cyrus. They succeeded by combining Persian control with local self-government.

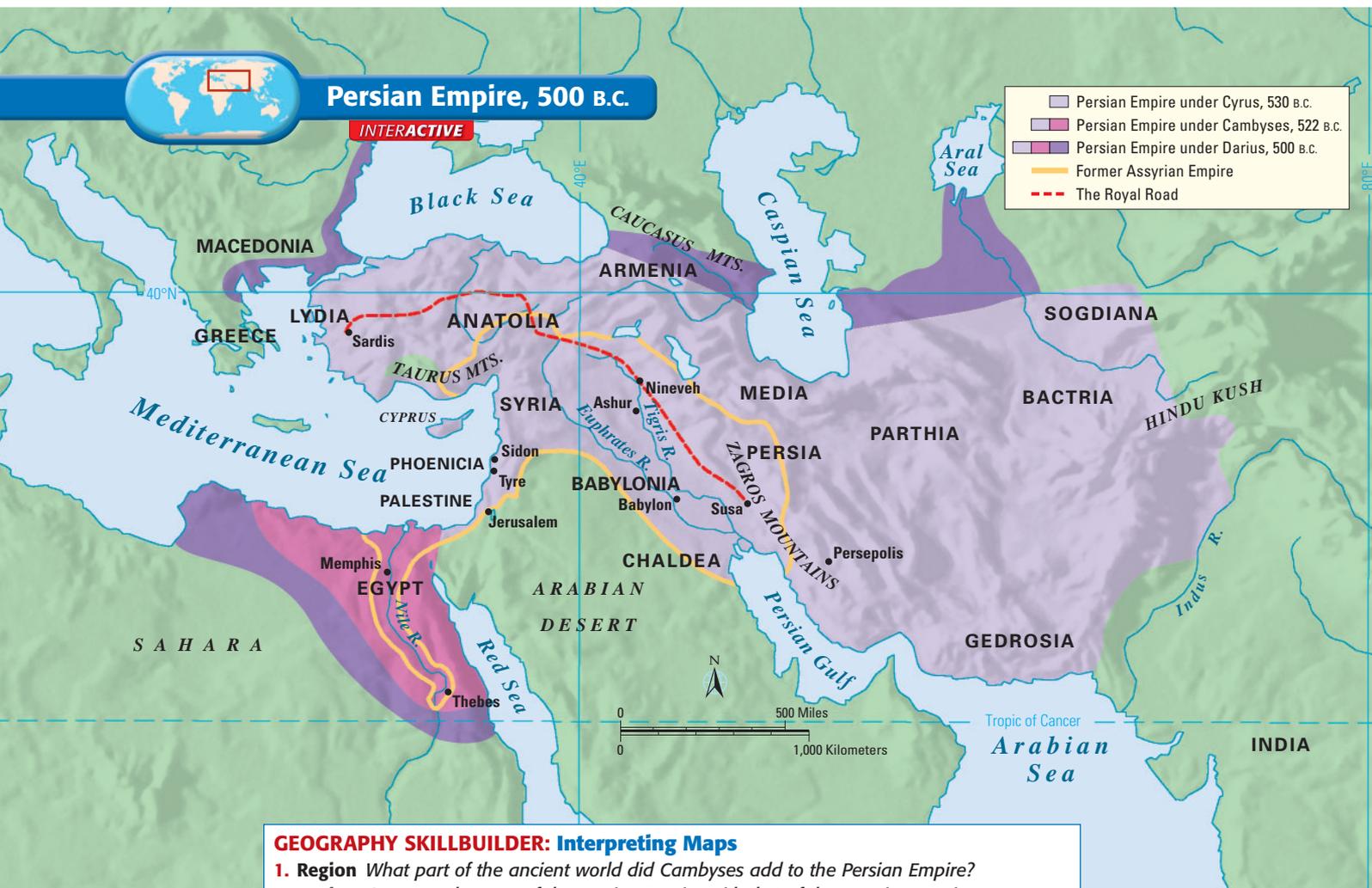
**Cambyses and Darius** Cyrus died in 530 B.C. His son **Cambyses** (kam•BY•seez), named after Cyrus’s father, expanded the Persian Empire by conquering Egypt. However, the son neglected to follow his father’s wise example. Cambyses scorned the Egyptian religion. He ordered the images of Egyptian gods to be burned. After ruling for only eight years, Cambyses died. Immediately, widespread rebellions broke out across the empire. Persian control had seemed strong a decade earlier. It now seemed surprisingly fragile.

Cambyses’s successor, **Darius** (duh•RY•uhs), a noble of the ruling dynasty, had begun his career as a member of the king’s bodyguard. An elite group of Persian soldiers, the Ten Thousand Immortals, helped Darius seize the throne around 522 B.C. Darius spent the first three years of his reign putting down revolts. He spent the next few years establishing a well-organized and efficient administration.

Having brought peace and stability to the empire, Darius turned his attention to conquest. He led his armies eastward into the mountains of present-day Afghanistan and then down into the river valleys of India. The immense Persian Empire now extended over 2,500 miles, embracing Egypt and Anatolia in the west, part of India in the east, and the Fertile Crescent in the center. Darius’s only failure was his inability to conquer Greece.

▼ Sculpted figures bring gifts to Darius. The relief sculpture, located in the ancient Persian capital of Persepolis, dates from around the sixth century B.C.





**Provinces and Satraps** Although Darius was a great warrior, his real genius lay in administration. To govern his sprawling empire, Darius divided it into 20 provinces. These provinces were roughly similar to the homelands of the different groups of people who lived within the Persian Empire. Under Persian rule, the people of each province still practiced their own religion. They also spoke their own language and followed many of their own laws. This administrative policy of many groups—sometimes called “nationalities”—living by their own laws within one empire was repeatedly practiced in Southwest Asia.

Although tolerant of the many groups within his empire, Darius still ruled with absolute power. In each province, Darius installed a governor called a **satrap** (SAY•TRAP), who ruled locally. Darius also appointed a military leader and a tax collector for each province. To ensure the loyalty of these officials, Darius sent out inspectors known as the “King’s Eyes and Ears.”

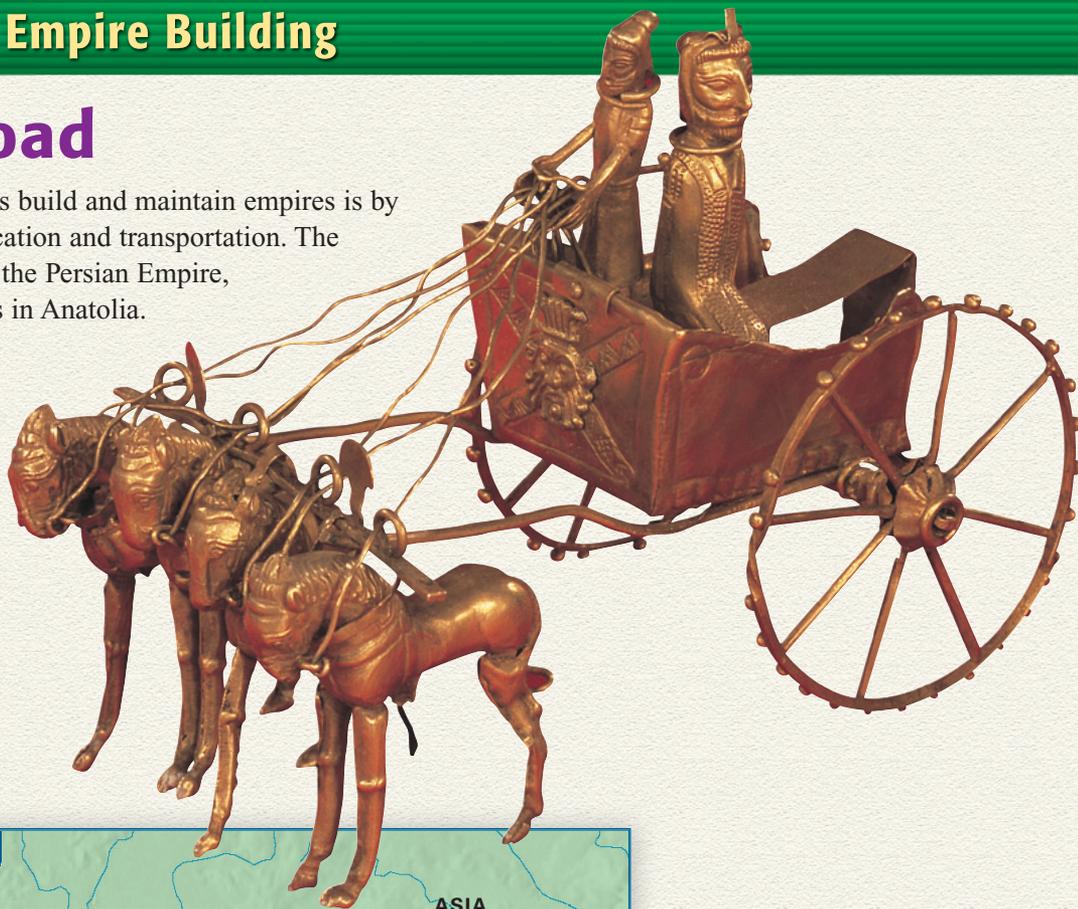
Two other tools helped Darius hold together his empire. An excellent system of roads allowed Darius to communicate quickly with the most distant parts of the empire. The famous **Royal Road**, for example, ran from Susa in Persia to Sardis in Anatolia, a distance of 1,677 miles. Darius borrowed the second tool, manufacturing metal coins, from the Lydians of Asia Minor. For the first time, coins of a standard value circulated throughout an extended empire. People no longer had to weigh and measure odd pieces of gold or silver to pay for what they bought. The network roads and the wide use of standardized coins promoted trade. Trade, in turn, helped to hold together the empire.

# Global Impact: Empire Building

## The Royal Road

One of the ways in which societies build and maintain empires is by establishing systems of communication and transportation. The Royal Road, built by the rulers of the Persian Empire, connected Susa in Persia to Sardis in Anatolia.

► This four-horse chariot dates from the 6th to 4th centuries B.C. It is the type of vehicle that would have traveled the Royal Road in the time of Darius. The studs on the wheels were designed to help prevent the chariot from slipping.



### The Road

The road was 1,677 miles in length. There were 111 post or relay stations spaced about 15 miles apart along the road. Other roads branched off the main road to distant parts of the empire.

### The Ride

Relay stations were equipped with fresh horses for the king's messengers. Royal messengers could cover the length of the Royal Road in seven days. Normal travel time along the road was longer. A caravan, for example, might take three months to travel the whole distance.



### Patterns of Interaction

*Building Empires: The Rise of the Persians and the Inca*

Strong road networks like the Royal Road enabled empires to expand and maintain control over people and places. Like the Persians, the Inca of South America created a road system thousands of miles long. These roads allowed the Inca to extend their rule over as many as 16 million people. Empires throughout history have shared characteristics such as efficient communication systems, effective leaders, and powerful armies.

### Connect to Today

- 1. Recognizing Effects** How would the Royal Road enable a ruler to maintain power in the empire?  
See Skillbuilder Handbook, Page R6.
- 2. Comparing** What systems of communication and transportation today might be compared to the Royal Road of the Persians?

## The Persian Legacy

By the time of Darius's rule, about 2,500 years had passed since the first Sumerian city-states had been built. During those years, people of the Fertile Crescent had endured war, conquest, and famine. These events gave rise to a basic question: Why should so much suffering and chaos exist in the world? A Persian prophet named **Zoroaster** (ZAWR•oh•AS•tuhr), who lived around 600 B.C., offered an answer.

**Zoroaster's Teachings** Zoroaster taught that the earth is a battleground where a great struggle is fought between the spirit of good and the spirit of evil. Each person, Zoroaster preached, is expected to take part in this struggle. The Zoroastrian religion teaches a belief in one god, Ahura Mazda (ah•HUR•uh MAZ•duh). At the end of time, Ahura Mazda will judge everyone according to how well he or she fought the battle for good. Traces of Zoroastrianism—such as the concept of Satan and a belief in angels—can be found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

After the Muslim conquest of Persia in the A.D. 600s, the Zoroastrian religion declined. Some groups carried the faith eastward to India. Zoroastrianism also was an important influence in the development of Manichaeism (man•i•KEE•IHZ•uhm), a religious system that competed with early Christianity for believers. The cult of Mithra, a Zoroastrian god, spread westward to become a popular religion among the military legions in the Roman Empire. Today, modern Zoroastrians continue to observe the religion's traditions in several countries including Iran and India, where its followers are called Parsis. **B**

**Political Order** Through their tolerance and good government, the Persians brought political order to Southwest Asia. They preserved ideas from earlier civilizations and found new ways to live and rule. Their respect for other cultures helped to preserve those cultures for the future. The powerful dynasty Cyrus established in Persia lasted 200 years and grew into a huge empire. Likewise in China, as you will learn in Section 4, great empires arose that dominated the region.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Comparing

**B** What ideas and world view did Zoroastrianism share with other religions?

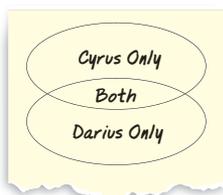
## SECTION 3 ASSESSMENT

**TERMS & NAMES** 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Cyrus
- Cambyses
- Darius
- satrap
- Royal Road
- Zoroaster

### USING YOUR NOTES

2. Which of the differences between Cyrus and Darius do you consider most important? Why?



### MAIN IDEAS

3. How did Cyrus treat the peoples he conquered?
4. What methods and tools did Darius use to hold together his empire?
5. What did Zoroaster teach?

### CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING

6. **MAKING INFERENCES** What do the words that appeared on Cyrus's tomb suggest about his character?
7. **DRAWING CONCLUSIONS** How did the Royal Road help Darius maintain control over his people?
8. **DEVELOPING HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE** What events led to the development of Zoroastrianism?
9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** **EMPIRE BUILDING** Write an **expository essay** explaining how Darius's methods of administration gave stability to the Persian Empire. In your essay, consider such topics as the structure of the empire, the policy of tolerance, and the role of the satrap.

### INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY INTERNET ACTIVITY

Use the Internet to find information on modern Zoroastrianism. Create a **chart** to present your findings.

**INTERNET KEYWORD**  
Zoroastrianism