

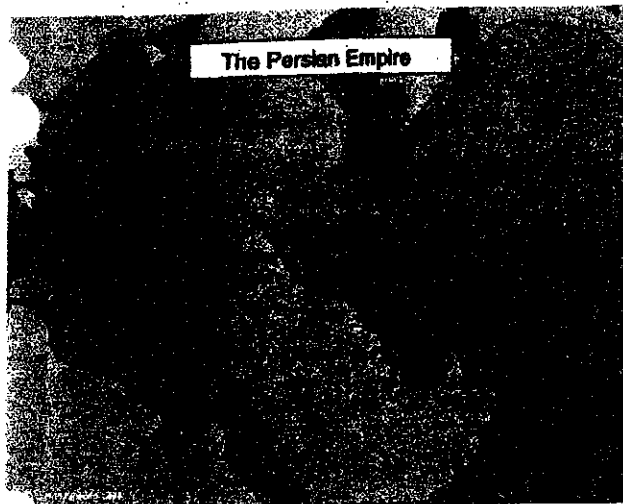
Name: _____

Persia: Rise of a World Empire

From the fall of the Assyrian empire in 612 B.C., when the grand city of Nineveh was razed to the ground by the enemies of Assyria, the Middle East saw over a half century of war and power struggles. The Twenty-Sixth Dynasty of Egypt (664-525 B.C.) saw a final burst of glory for ancient Egypt, but their dominance in the Middle East was short lived, and they fell to the Persians in 525 B.C. The Chaldean Empire (612-539 B.C.) under Nebuchadnezzar rose to glory making the city of Babylon, with its Hanging Gardens and Ishtar Gate, the center of the world for over half a century. And the Empire of Medes, from the lands of modern-day Iran also expanded its interests in Mesopotamia. Under the reign of Cyaxares (625-585 B.C.), Media overthrew Assyria with the aid of the Babylonians and the Scythians. The Persians conquered all of the above empires (Media, Chaldea, and Egypt).

The Persian Empire (550-331 B.C.) united all of the lands, from the Nile to the Indus to the coasts of the Black Sea, into the largest and arguably most diverse empire on the planet at that time. This rapid rise and longevity of success was due to two rulers: Cyrus the Great and Darius.

Read about these two men below and then create a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting their reigns, personalities, and actions.



The Persian Empire

Cyrus the Great (550-530 B.C.)

The Builder of the Persian Empire

In 550 B.C. Cyrus led a revolt of the Persians. He overthrew the Medes and combined the two kingdoms. Ruling from the Median capital Ecbatana, he proclaimed himself Great King of the Medes and the Persians and inaugurated the Achaemenid Empire of Persia. Cyrus immediately proceeded to expand the limits of his kingdom. In 546 B.C. he defeated Croesus, the fabulously rich king of Lydia in western Anatolia, and captured the important trading center and capital of Sardis.

Having conquered Lydia (an immensely rich kingdom in what is today Turkey, and famous for the coin system adapted by Cyrus to some extent), Cyrus proceeded to capture the Ionian cities (546—540 B.C.). These conquests carried the Persian Empire all the way to the Aegean Sea, farther west than the empire of the Assyrians. In the years that followed, Cyrus was accepted as their ruler by many of the cities in Elam and Babylonia without fighting. In 539 B.C. he attacked Babylon itself. The city fell in a few days, and Cyrus annexed the whole of the Chaldean Empire (of Nebuchadnezzar), including Syria-Palestine.

Wherever possible Cyrus let the conquered nations follow their own local laws and customs. He presented himself to them not as a foreign conqueror but as the lawful successor to their own national rulers. In Persia he was "Cyrus of Anshan" and in Media "Great King, King of Kings". He made himself into the successor of each land: be it pharaoh or king. He couched himself in the local traditions.

Cyrus allowed all of the gods of the different cultures of the Fertile Crescent to be worshipped by their respective groups. He allowed the captive Jews to return to Palestine from their Babylonian Captivity, initiated by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. His policies of cultural independence won over many peoples, and he was regarded as a rare being: a despot with concern for all mankind. He died, however, on the battlefield against the Scythians and never got to put his ideals to the full test. This warrior-king forged the Persian Empire with steel and blood, but allowed it to prosper with a tolerant approach to organizing the vastly diverse empire.

His son Cambyses (ruled 530-521 B.C.) worked closely with his father as regent during his father's later years, and together they planned the conquest of Egypt. Following his father on the throne, Cambyses did indeed conquer Egypt, but he was not as tolerant of opposition and differences as his father, although he did adopt the customs of conquered people, even dressing as a pharaoh upon the conquest of the Nile river valley.

Darius (521-486 B.C.)

The Persian Empire at its Peak

During Cambyses' (the son of Cyrus), Egyptian campaign a certain Darius, 28 years old and distant cousin of the king, served as an officer in the famous Persian royal bodyguard, the "Ten Thousand Immortals," which had the reputation of being the finest body of soldiers in the known world. On the death of Cambyses, Darius claimed the kingship and was supported in his claim by the Immortals. He led the troops back to Babylon, where he slew the rebel who had claimed the throne from Cambyses. For two more years there were revolts in every part of the empire. In crushing them Darius' greatest support came from six young Persians from noble families. Darius and they became known as the "Seven" and linked their families together by intermarriage. As long as the Persian Empire lasted, the descendants of these families were given special privileges, such as preferment at court and the right to rule their estates as semi-independent princes (satraps). These privileges later proved to be a serious threat to the unity of the empire and the power of the king, and contributed, eventually, to the dangerous weakening of Persia.

Darius extended the boundaries of the Persian Empire to include lands never previously held by any one state of the Fertile Crescent. Eastward he went across the mountains into India and held the Indus Valley. He ordered the exploration of a sea route from India to Egypt in order to increase the ocean-borne trade of his empire. All these ventures in central Asia and India were pioneer ventures later to be imitated by Alexander the Great. Darius then visited Egypt. To round out the world's greatest empire, Darius next launched an attack on the Scythian tribes in Europe near the mouth of the Danube and along the northern coast of the Black Sea. For the first time in history an Asiatic state had a foothold in Europe.

Darius gave the Persian Empire the organization and administrative apparatus it badly needed but that his predecessors had been too busy to create. He followed the example set by the Assyrians and divided his empire into a group of provinces, each with its satrap (royal governor), military commander, and treasurer, who reported separately and directly to the King. In addition to these Assyrian-type officials, Darius created royal inspectors called sometimes the "Eyes" and sometimes the "Ears" of the king. The inspectors made unexpected visits to the provinces, examined official records, and sitting as judges to hear complaints from the local people against the regular provincial officials. The inspectors had their own army contingents with them, so they could act against the military commander of a province if it became necessary. This system proved so effective in venting corruption, rebellious plotting, and unwarranted harshness that was copied in ancient, medieval, and even modern times by other peoples. Darius also permitted local practices the same toleration shown by Cyrus the Great.