Greece and Persia

Persia's Empire

About the time that the government in Athens was undergoing political changes, the Persians were building a powerful empire in Southwest Asia. Persia (PUHR • zhuh), the homeland of the Persians, was located in what is today southwestern Iran.

Early Persians were warriors and cattle herders from the grasslands of central Asia. After settling in the highlands of Persia, they came under the control of other peoples. Then a dynasty of kings brought the Persians together into a powerful kingdom. In the 500s B.C., a talented king named Cyrus (SY • ruhs) the Great built a strong Persian army. With that army, he began creating an empire that became the largest in the ancient world.

Creating an Empire

During the 540s B.C., Persian troops swept into neighboring lands. They brought Mesopotamia, Syria, Canaan, and the Greek city-states of the area of Anatolia under Persian rule. King Cyrus held his growing empire together by treating conquered peoples fairly. He allowed them to keep their own languages, religions, and laws. In addition, Cyrus decided that the Jews exiled in Babylon would be allowed to return to their homeland.

After Cyrus, other Persian rulers continued to expand the empire. Their armies took over Egypt, western India, and lands to the northeast of Greece. From west to east, the Persian Empire stretched a distance of some 3,000 miles (4,800 km). This is about the size of the continental United States today.

To link this large territory, the Persians improved the network of roads begun by the Assyrians. The most important route, the Royal Road, ran more than 1,500 miles (2,400 km) from Persia to Anatolia. Travelers could obtain food, water, and fresh horses at roadside stations along the route. Using the Royal Road, messengers could travel from Persia to Anatolia in just seven days. That same journey had taken three months before the road was built.

Persian Government

As the Persian Empire expanded, its increasing size made it more difficult to manage. Darius I (duh • RY • uhs), who ruled Persia from 522 to 486 B.C., reorganized the government to make it more efficient. He divided the empire into provinces called satrapies (SAY • truh • peez). Each satrapy was ruled by a governor called a satrap (SAY • trap), which means "defender of the kingdom." The satrap collected taxes, judged legal cases, managed the police, and recruited soldiers for the Persian army.

Persia maintained a full-time, paid, professional army. In comparison, the Greek army consisted of citizens called to serve only during times of war. The best fighters in the Persian army were the 10,000 soldiers who were trained to guard the king.
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They were known as the Immortals because when a member died, another soldier immediately took his place.

Who Was Zoroaster?

The Persians at first worshipped many gods. Then, sometime in the 600s B.C., a religious teacher named Zoroaster (ZOHR • uh • WAS • tuhr) preached a new monotheistic religion. Most Persians accepted his religion, which was called Zoroastrianism (zohr • uh • WAS • tree • uh • nih • zuhm).

Zoroaster taught that there was one supreme god. This deity was called Ahura Mazda, or "Wise Lord." Ahura Mazda was the creator of all things and the leader of the forces of good. Zoroaster believed that evil existed in the world. People were free to choose between good and evil, but at the end of time, goodness would be victorious. Zoroastrian teachings, prayers, and hymns (sacred songs) were written down in a holy book. Because of Zoroastrianism, the Persians began to view their monarchy as a sacred institution or role. Persian kings believed that they ruled by the power of Ahura Mazda and were responsible to him alone. Darius I had the following statement carved on a cliff:

"For this reason Ahura Mazda [the Zoroastrian god] bore me aid . . . because I was not an enemy, I was not a deceiver, I was not a wrong-doer, neither I nor my family; according to rectitude [righteousness] I ruled."

— from Darius I, Behistun Inscription, column 4, line 4.13

After Darius's rule ended, the Persians continued to practice Zoroastrianism for centuries. The religion has about 200,000 followers today. Most of them live in South Asia.

Questions:

1) Who was the first king of the Persian Empire and how was he successful?

2) How did the Persian link the large territory together?

3) How did the Persians rule a vast empire?

4) How did the Persian army differ from Greek armies?

5) Describe the religion of the Persians.