The Persian Empire

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The Persian Empire stretched from Egypt in North Africa to Turkey in Eastern Europe. It included Mesopotamia in the Middle East, and went as far as the Indus River in Asia.

Persia is also known as ancient Iran. Iran is now just a country in the Middle East. But by 480 B.C., it was the largest empire the world had ever seen. It was even greater than the empire that came before it, Assyria.

In 539 B.C., King Cyrus decided to expand the boundaries of Persia. He began by conquering Babylon, the major city of Mesopotamia. Unlike Assyrian kings, who were cruel to the people they ruled, Cyrus was known for his mercy.
Kind King Cyrus

One example was how he treated the Hebrews, who had been captives in Babylon for over 50 years. He allowed them to return to the holy city of Jerusalem instead of forcing them into slavery. He returned sacred items that were stolen from them and allowed them to build a capital and a temple. Cyrus also allowed the Hebrews to continue living and worshiping as they chose.

Cyrus's generosity toward the Jews was not a one-time event. Compared to other rulers, he and the leaders after him were gentler to people they conquered. Persian rulers cooperated with local governments and did not get much involved in matters that did not directly affect their rule. They also respected local traditions. They even followed some of the religious practices of the people they conquered.

Rather than destroy local economies for their own gain, the Persians worked to increase trade throughout their kingdom. They soon made everyone use the same system of weights, official coins and laws.

Collecting taxes and giving out land

The Persian leaders needed everyone to cooperate. They put a 20 percent tax on food and goods produced. In other words, those who lived under Persian rule had to pay one fifth of what they earned to the empire. The Persians also taxed religious institutions, which were quite rich but had never been taxed before. The Persians themselves paid no taxes.

The Persian kings — especially Cyrus and, later, Darius I (522–486 B.C.) — created a system of government for ruling a large empire. The system worked well enough that it was copied later by other rulers.

Laws were carried out fairly and evenly among all of the various peoples in the empire. The Persians divided their empire into 20 provinces, or regions, that were overseen by governors. They gave land to wealthy landowners in order to keep them loyal. The landowners also had to send soldiers to join the Persian army. Most of the people in the empire, including most Persians, simply remained struggling farmers or craftspeople.
Cyrus built an early kind of mail system, too. He built a 1,600-mile-long royal road from the city Sardis to Susa, one of the government capitals. Along this road there were many places to stay overnight, where royal messengers could get fresh horses and supplies.

**A new religion**

The Persians also developed a religion based on monotheism — the belief in one god. It was founded by the prophet Zoroaster, also called Zarathustra in old Iranian. Many of his ideas were collected in a series of poems called the Gathas, which became part of the religion's most sacred book, the Avesta.

Zoroaster believed that people were training for a future life. He taught that the world was torn by a constant struggle between good and evil. Humans would have to choose between the two to prepare for a final judgment, when good would win over evil. When this happened, our physical lives on Earth would disappear.

The Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, represented goodness and wisdom. Some religious scholars believe that Zoroaster's ideas strongly influenced the Hebrew and Christian religions.

**Alexander the Great takes all**

Despite the Persians' effective and more peaceful leadership, their empire did not last. Under King Xerxes in 480 B.C., the Persians tried to expand their empire into Greece. The Greek city-states joined together and held off the Persians, almost destroying the Persian navy.

When Alexander the Great rose to power in 331 B.C., he put an end to Persian dreams of expanding their empire. Young and intelligent, Alexander had no equal as a military leader. He swept through the ancient world, conquering all of the Persian Empire.
Quiz

1. Read the sections "Kind King Cyrus" and "Collecting taxes and giving out land."
Which sentence from the sections supports the conclusion that the Persian system of government was viewed as a success?

   (A) They soon made everyone use the same system of weights, official coins and laws.
   (B) The Persians also taxed religious institutions, which were quite rich but had never been taxed before.
   (C) The system worked well enough that it was copied later by other rulers.
   (D) Laws were carried out fairly and evenly among all of the various peoples in the empire.

2. Read the section "Alexander the Great takes all."
Select the paragraph that suggests the Persian Empire was weakened by too much ambition.

3. Read the section "Kind King Cyrus."
HOW does this section contribute to the article's MAIN idea?

   (A) by illustrating the effects of past rulers on Persian policies
   (B) by emphasizing the problems faced by Persian rulers
   (C) by describing the reasons for the Persian rulers’ mercy
   (D) by contrasting Persian rulers with previous rulers in that region

4. HOW effective are the first two paragraphs at introducing the topic of the Persian Empire?

   (A) Very effective; they illustrate the contrast between the empires before and after it.
   (B) Mostly effective; they describe the underlying causes of the empire’s greatness in the region.
   (C) Somewhat effective; they outline the size and location of the empire but do not explain its importance.
   (D) Not at all effective; they focus mostly on describing other empires in the area such as Mesopotamia and Assyria.