

Fighting the Greco-Persian Wars

What factors influenced the outcome of the Greco-Persian Wars?

Introduction

Athens and Sparta were two very different city-states in ancient Greece. Their differences sometimes led to a distrust of each other. However, between 499 and 479 B.C.E., these city-states had a common enemy—the Persian Empire.

At that time, Persia was the largest empire the world had ever seen. Its powerful kings ruled over lands in Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean region, including Greek settlements in Asia Minor. During the 400s B.C.E., the Greek settlement of Ionia revolted against Persian rule. Though some Greek city-states sent aid, the Ionians eventually were defeated.

Following the defeat of Ionian rebels, the Persians sent a force against the Greeks. Some of the Greek city-states joined together as **allies** against the Persians. Allies are states that agree to help each other against a common enemy.

Compared with Persia, these tiny Greek city-states had much less land and far fewer people. How could they possibly turn back such a powerful invader?

Although both Greek city-states were known for brilliant military strategies, so were the Persians. Each group had to use its armies and navies wisely throughout the Greco-Persian Wars.

In this lesson, you will learn about important battles during the Greco-Persian Wars and discover who won them. You will also learn about the factors that influenced the outcome of the Greco-Persian Wars.

1. The Persian Empire

The ancient Persians started as a small group of nomads who lived in Parsa, in what is today southern Iran. In time, however, the Persians would build the first world empire with the help of their well-trained archers, spearmen, and riders.

The ruler who established the Persian Empire was Cyrus II, known as Cyrus the Great. Cyrus ruled the Persian Empire from 559 to 530 B.C.E. Cyrus was a skilled military and political leader, who united different Persian and Iranian groups. He then expanded the empire throughout parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe.

At its height, the **Persian Empire** extended from Egypt, in North Africa, east to the Indus River in present-day Pakistan. The empire was ruled by powerful kings who conquered Mesopotamia,

Asia Minor, Egypt, and parts of India and Europe. Although these Persian rulers required people to pay tribute or taxes, they also efficiently built roads, canals, and irrigation systems in these conquered lands. The Persians built the largest empire at that time, and created a model for ruling an empire—a model that both the Greeks and Romans would later follow.

The Persian Empire, and the kings who ruled it, were often tolerant to those living under its rule. Conquered lands were not forced to adopt Persian customs or religion. In fact, the Persian Empire often borrowed ideas and customs from the regions it ruled. However, despite the stability that the Persian Empire provided, some people wanted to be independent and chose to rebel.

After Cyrus died in battle, his son, Cambyses II (kam-BAHY-seez), became king and ruled the empire from 530 to 522 B.C.E. King Cambyses brought Egypt under Persian control. However, his later attempts to gain Ethiopia were unsuccessful. King Cambyses also faced conflict in Persia when a man claiming to be his brother gained control of several provinces. King Cambyses never had a chance to resolve this conflict, for he died on his way back to Persia.

Following the death of King Cambyses, a struggle for the Persian throne broke out. A Persian named **Darius** (duh-RAHY-uhs) became king and restored order to the empire. King Darius I, also known as Darius the Great, ruled Persia from 522 to 486 B.C.E.

Considered one of the greatest of all the Persian kings, Darius created a system to organize and rule the empire. He divided the empire into 20 provinces and appointed officials to rule local areas. In addition to allowing the provinces to continue practicing their own religions and customs, King Darius permitted conquered peoples to maintain their own legal traditions. He also established a system of tax collection throughout the empire.

Like the emperors before him, King Darius worked to expand the Persian Empire. He attacked the area to the east of the Caspian Sea and moved further into the Indus Valley. He also pushed the boundaries of the Persian Empire into Europe. The Persian army crossed the **Hellespont** (HEL-uh-spont), a narrow sea channel between Europe and Asia. However, the Persian Empire had little success in conquering Europe. King Darius died while plans were being made to invade Greece.

After King Darius's death in 486 B.C.E., his son, **Xerxes** (zurk-seez), became the king and ruled until 465 B.C.E. King Xerxes faced revolts in Egypt and Mesopotamia, but he successfully ended both rebellions.

Like his father, King Xerxes wanted to expand the Persian Empire further into Europe, particularly Greece. However, he too failed to make many gains in Europe. While the military continued to fight in Greece, King Xerxes returned to Persia, where he was murdered. The death of Xerxes led to a period of instability among the Persian leadership, but it did not end the empire. The empire continued to exist for many years under different leadership groups. The next sections will take a closer look at the wars Persia fought against Greece under the rule of Darius and Xerxes.

2. The Ionian Revolt

In 499 B.C.E., during the rule of King Darius, the Ionian Revolt began, leading to the start of the **Greco-Persian Wars**. In 546 B.C.E., under the leadership of Cyrus, the Persians had conquered the wealthy Greek settlements in Ionia, a coastal region bordering the Aegean Sea, in Asia Minor. The Persians took the Ionians' farmland and harbors. They required the Ionians to pay tributes, or the regular payments of goods, and serve in the Persian military. However, the Ionian settlements still governed themselves under local leaders.

After nearly 50 years of Persian rule, the Ionians sought to regain control of their territory. However, they knew that they could not defeat the Persians by themselves, so they asked mainland Greece for help. Athens sent soldiers and a fleet of ships. Unfortunately for the Ionians, the Athenians went home after an initial success, leaving the Ionian army to continue fighting alone.

To punish the Ionians for rebelling, the Persians destroyed the city of Miletus (my-LEE-tuhs). In 493 B.C.E., the Persians defeated the Ionians.