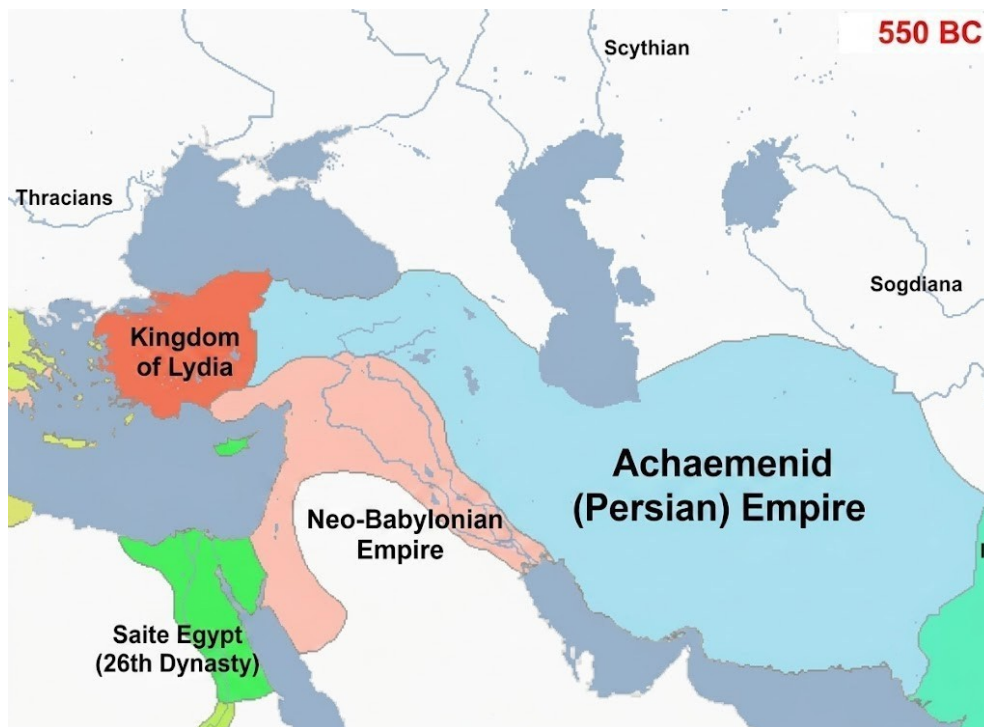


Achaemenid Conquest of the Near East



OVERVIEW: The Persian conquests occurred between the eras of the Iron Age and Classical Antiquity, spanning 550–510 BCE. During so, Cyrus the Great, and his successors, forged the Achaemenid Empire, dismantling the ancient empires of Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt. This expansion would bring contact with the Ionian Greeks, eventually cascading into the Greco-Persian Wars, often argued as the dawn of a western civilization. I used QGIS for two spatial analyses:

- 1) An interactive web map of key battle and city locations displayed over an Esri Shaded Relief basemap and published via qgis2web and Leaflet.
- 2) A travel-time model of the Royal Road as it would've been in 500 BCE, testing Herodotus's claim that royal couriers covered Susa to Sardis in nine days across roughly 111 relay stations. It converts each leg from distance to time at courier, army, and caravan speeds, then maps isochrones (QNEAT3 Iso-Area as Polygons) showing how far each reaches from Susa in 1, 3, 5, and 7 days, exposing which satrapies lay beyond quick reach.

Detailed Information:

Cyrus II united Persia by rebelling against Median rule, against his grandfather, King Astyages, in 550 BCE.² He defeated the Median Empire and merged it with his Persian kingdom of Anshan to form what is now known as the Achaemenid Empire, named after his dynasty.³ His empire had adopted Zoroastrianism as its guiding religious framework.⁴ Next, Cyrus II would conduct military campaigns against Lydia and Babylon.⁵ Babylon's last king, Nabonidus, alienated Marduk's priesthood by promoting the moon god Sîn and decamping for a decade to the Arabian oasis of Tayma. After conquering Babylon in 539 BCE, Cyrus demonstrated remarkable religious tolerance by allowing exiled peoples, including the Jews, to return to their homelands and rebuild their temple, freeing them from Babylonian captivity.⁶ Though highly disputed, it is said that Cyrus II died in battle against the Scythians, in an attempt to add even more land to his empire.⁷ As for his legacy, Cyrus II would be referred to as Cyrus "the Great" by Greek historians such as Herodotus in the 5th century BCE.

While many academic scholars identify the Quranic figure of Dhul-Qarnayn (Zulkarnain) with Alexander the Great, a more modern interpretation makes the case for Cyrus the Great instead.⁸ This view was notably argued by Allamah Tabatabai, a leading 20th-century Iranian Shia philosopher and Quranic exegete, who in his Quranic commentary "Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an" challenged the Alexander identification and pointed to Cyrus's monotheistic-leaning piety and vast east-west empire.⁹

Cambyes II, the eldest son and successor of Cyrus the Great, ascended to the Achaemenid throne in 530 BCE and continued conquest by invading Egypt in 525 BCE, defeating Pharaoh Psamtik III at the Battle of Pelusium.¹⁰ Herodotus writes of that battle saying

Persian forces exploited the Egyptians' sacred reverence for cats by painting feline images on shields or carrying live cats into battle, causing the enemy to falter rather than harm the animals.¹¹ There were many exaggerated, fanciful, or legendary stories in regards to Cambyses II, depicting him as increasingly tyrannical and mad:

1. **The Apis Bull:** Herodotus claims that Cambyses, arriving in Memphis after conquering Egypt, stabbed the sacred Apis bull in the thigh to mock Egyptian worship, wounding it so badly that it later died.¹²
2. **The Lost Army of Cambyses:** It's said that Cambyses II ordered a military expedition to the Siwa Oasis to destroy the Oracle of Amun, a religious site that held immense political and psychological power over the Egyptian people. The supposed force of 50,000 Persian soldiers is said to have vanished entirely in a massive sandstorm during the march. Numerous archeology expeditions have searched for archaeological evidence, but none have been widely accepted as definitive proof.¹³
3. **Familial Cruelty:** Herodotus details Cambyses murdering his brother Bardiya fearing he would seize the throne, and marrying his own sister to consolidate dynastic power.¹⁴

Whether rooted in truth or complete fabrication, it's clear that Greek literature leaned into the theme of hubris (excessive pride). By portraying Persian Kings as unstable tyrants, Greek writers could highlight the superiority of Greek democratic ideals over Eastern "despotism."¹⁵ After the Greco-Persian Wars, Athens launched a major military intervention in support of the Egyptian revolt against Persia led by Inaros (460–454 BCE).¹⁶

Auxiliary Historical Information:

Despite surviving the Late Bronze Age Collapse, Egypt's New Kingdom declined due to economic strain, droughts, famines, and corruption, which produced weak pharaohs unable to counter the rising power of Theban priests. This culminated in Egypt's division between northern pharaohs and southern priestly rulers. The Third Intermediate Period followed, characterized with Libyan and Nubian ruling dynasties. This era ended when the Assyrians invaded and sacked Thebes in 663 BC, expelling the Nubians. Psamtik I of Sais, initially an Assyrian vassal, reunited Egypt through diplomacy and military force, peacefully securing Egypt and founding the 26th Dynasty.¹⁷

The Neo-Assyrian Empire rose from the ashes of earlier Assyrian kingdoms through a series of aggressive military reforms and expansionist campaigns. At its height, the empire stretched from Mesopotamia to Egypt, dominating the ancient Near East with an iron fist. The Babylonians and Medes, both long-suffering under brutal Assyrian domination and deportation, united.¹⁸



'The Fall of Nineveh' by John Marin (1829)

This 1829 painting depicts the 612 BCE destruction of the Assyrian capital by a Medo-Babylonian alliance, occurring just before Cyrus II's lifetime. It marked the end of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and the beginning of the Neo Babylonian Empire.¹⁹ This empire would itself fall to the Achaemenids in 539 BCE.

Elsewhere, the Kingdom of Lydia in western Anatolia grew rich from the gold-bearing waters of the River Pactolus.²⁰ Lydia's prosperity made it a major player in Aegean trade and politics, exerting influence of the Greek cities of the Ionian coast. In the north, roaming the vast grasslands of the Pontic Steppe, were the Scythians. They were masters of horse warfare. Their warrior culture is vividly preserved in the great burial mounds, or kurgans, scattered across Ukraine, where excavations have unearthed elaborate golden artifacts and weapons buried alongside their chiefs.²¹

Beginning of Darius I's Reign

Cambyses II died in 522 BCE under mysterious circumstances while returning from Egypt to reclaim his throne.²² Some accounts suggest suicide brought on by madness, others whisper assassination, but the result was the same: the empire was left leaderless.²³ The crisis had begun while Cambyses was still away, when a man claiming to be Bardiya, the son of Cyrus, seized the Persian throne. He won the hearts of the common people across the empire by canceling taxes and military service.²⁴ News of the usurper had reached Cambyses in Egypt, and he rushed home to challenge him, only to die along the way.

The vacuum plunged Persia into a year of chaos. Babylon, Media, Elam, Parthia, Sagartia, Margiana, and other provinces raised the banner of revolt at once, with nine rebel kings challenging Persian authority simultaneously. The Achaemenid Empire teetered on the edge of total collapse.²⁵ The resolution came from Darius, a former spear-bearer to Cambyses, who along with six noble conspirators assassinated Gaumata in September of 522 BCE and proclaimed himself King of Kings.²⁶ His reign began not with celebration but with war on every front.

Darius spent the following year crushing the uprisings. Babylon rebelled a second time under Nebuchadnezzar III, its people mocking the Persians and boasting they had supplies to last twenty years, but through cunning and persistence Darius breached the city's defenses.²⁷ Darius would record his campaigns on a towering cliff face at Behistun around 520 BCE, boasting of nineteen battles won and nine rebel kings captured. The trilingual inscription proclaimed to the world that Persia endures.²⁸

With the empire secured, Darius reorganized it into satrapies with standardized taxation and built the Royal Road from Sardis to Susa to boost communication and trade.²⁹ His territories stretched from Egypt to the Indus Valley. Around 513 BCE he led a massive army across the Danube into the Pontic Steppe, seeking to secure his northern frontier and punish the Scythians for past raids.³⁰ The Scythians refused open battle, retreating endlessly and scorching the earth behind them while their horse-archers harassed the overstretched Persian supply lines. Their king sent Darius a bird, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows, a cryptic message of defiance.³¹ Running low on supplies and unable to conquer the elusive nomads, Darius ordered a retreat. Despite the setback, he consolidated his hold over Thrace and Macedonia, securing the western frontier and pushing Persian influence to the doorstep of mainland Greece.³²

That foothold set the stage for conflict. During the Ionian Revolt, rebels backed by Athens and Eretria burned Sardis in 498 BCE, after which Darius vowed to punish Athens.³³ He demanded "earth and water" from the Greek city-states as symbols of submission. Many complied, but Athens and Sparta refused.³⁴ In 490 BCE, Darius I launched the First Persian invasion of Greece to punish Athens and Eretria for supporting the Ionian Revolt. The campaign concluded that same year at the Battle of Marathon, where an outnumbered Athenian force unexpectedly routing the invading Persians.³⁵ A decade later, Darius's son Xerxes launched the second and final Persian invasion, famously marked by the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae and a decisive Athenian-led naval victory at Salamis.

Endnotes

- [1] Herodotus, *Histories* 5.52-54 (description of the Royal Road)
- [2] Herodotus 1.123-130
- [3] Behustin Inscription (DB)
- [4] Behustin Inscription (DB)
- [5] Herodotus 1.71-91
- [6] Cyrus Cylinder
- [7] Herodotus 1.1201-214 (death among the Massagetae); manner disputed
- [8] Qur'an 18.83-98
- [9] Tabatabai, *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, on Surah al-Kah*
- [10] Herodotus 3.1-13 (Battle of Pelusium)
- [11] Polyaeus, *Stratagems* 7.9
- [12] Herodotus 3.27-29; disputed
- [13] Herodotus 3.25-26; see the 2009 Castiglioni findings
- [14] Herodotus 3.30-32
- [15] Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*.
- [16] Thucydides 1.104, 109-110 (Inaros revolt)
- [17] Herodotus 2.151-157 (on Psamtik I)
- [18] Babylonian Chronicles
- [19] Fall of Nineveh Chronicle
- [20] Herodotus 1.6-94
- [21] Herodotus 4.71-72
- [22] Herodotus 3.64-66
- [23] Behistun Inscription §11 says Cambyses "died his own death," leaving the manner ambiguous
- [24] Herodotus 3.61
- [25] Behistun Inscription (DB), enumerated revolts
- [26] Herodotus 3.70-79
- [27] Herodotus 3.150-159

- [28] Behistun Inscription (DB)
- [29] Herodotus 3.89-97 (satrapies); 5.52-54 (Royal Road)
- [30] Herodotus 4.83-98 (Scythian campaign of 513 BCE)
- [31] Herodotus 4.131-132 (the Scythian gifts)
- [32] Herodotus 4.143; 5.1-2
- [33] Herodotus 5.99-102
- [34] Herodotus 6.48-49; 7.133
- [35] Herodotus 6.94-117