

CHARLES RIVER EDITORS



# *of* THE EMPIRES ANCIENT PERSIA

The History and Legacy of the Achaemenids, Parthians,  
and Sassanids in Antiquity

**The Empires of Ancient Persia: The History and Legacy of  
the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sassanids in Antiquity  
By Charles River Editors**



**Albor Zagros' picture of the ruins of the Gate of All Nations in  
Persepolis**

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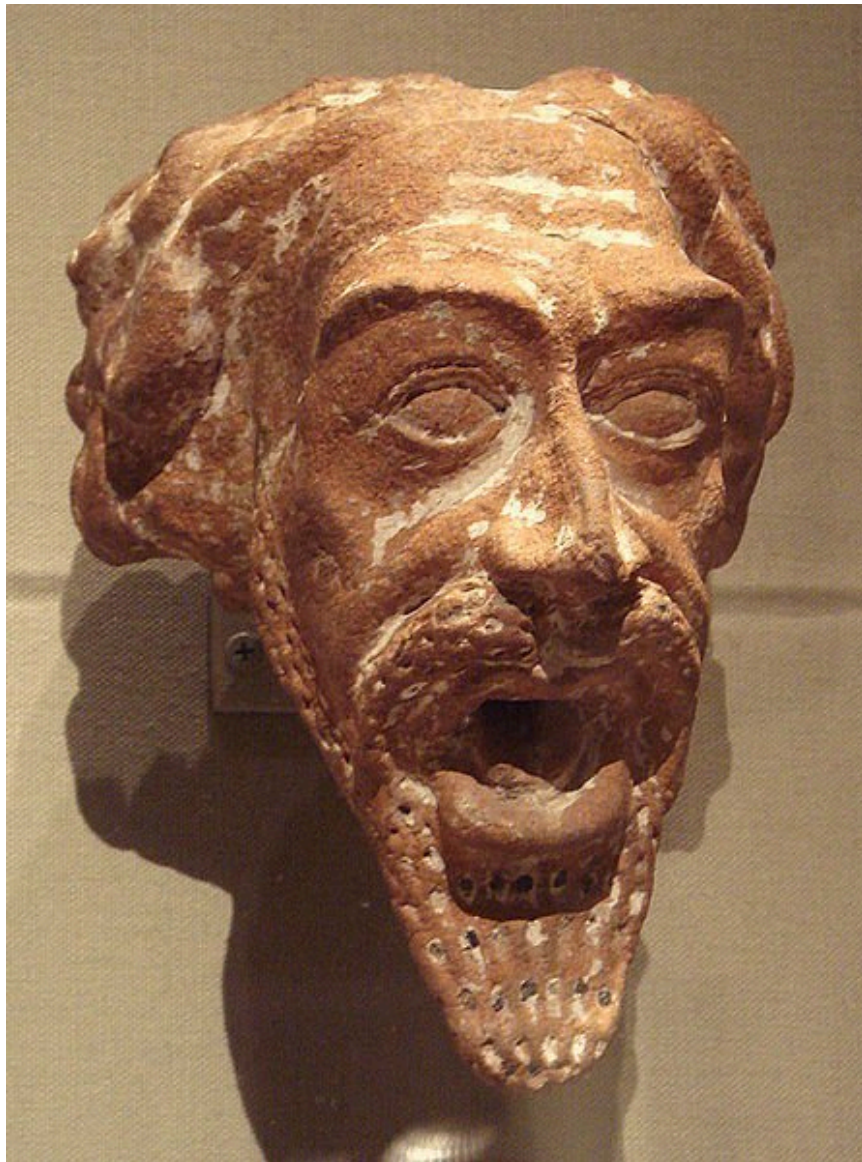


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## **Introduction**



**An ancient Parthian waterspout**

## **The Empires of Ancient Persia**

“By the favor of Ahuramazda these are the countries which I got into my possession along with this Persian people, which felt fear of me and bore me tribute : Elam, Media, Babylonia, Arabia, Assyria, Egypt, Armenia, Cappadocia, Lydia, the Greeks who are of the mainland and those who are by

the sea, and countries which are across the sea, Sagartia, Parthia, Drangiana, Aria, Bactria, Sogdia, Chorasmia, Sattagydia, Arachosia, Hinduš, Gandara, Sacae, Maka.” – An inscription on a terrace wall in Persepolis, circa 521 CE

“The Parthians in whose hands the empire of the east now is, having divided the world, as it were, with the Romans, were originally exiles from Scythia. This is apparent from their very name; for in the Scythian language exiles are called Parthi. During the time of the Assyrians and Medes, they were the most obscure of all the people of the east. Subsequently, too, when the empire of the east was transferred from the Medes to the Persians, they were but as a herd without a name, and fell under the power of the stronger. At last they became subject to the Macedonians, when they conquered the east; so that it must seem wonderful to every one, that they should have reached such a height of good fortune as to rule over those nations under whose sway they had been merely slaves. Being assailed by the Romans, also, in three wars, under the conduct of the greatest generals, and at the most flourishing period of the republic, they alone, of all nations, were not only a match for them, but came off victorious; though it may have been a greater glory to them, indeed, to have been able to rise amidst the Assyrian, Median, and Persian empires, so celebrated of old, and the most powerful dominion of Bactria, peopled with a thousand cities, than to have been victorious in war against a people that came from a distance; especially when they were continually harassed by severe wars with the Scythians and other neighboring nations, and pressed with various other formidable contests.” – An ancient Roman account of the Parthians

Lying in the middle of a plain in modern day Iran is a forgotten ancient city: Persepolis. Built two and a half thousand years ago, it was known in its day as the richest city under the sun. Persepolis was the capital of Achaemenid Persian Empire, the largest empire the world had ever seen, but after its destruction, it was largely forgotten for nearly 2,000 years, and the lives and achievements of those who built it were almost entirely erased from history. Alexander the Great’s troops razed the city to the ground in a drunken riot to celebrate the conquest of the capital, after which time and sand buried it for centuries.

It was not until the excavations of the 1930s that many of the relics, reliefs, and clay tablets that offer so much information about Persian life could be

studied for the first time. Through archaeological remains, ancient texts, and work by a new generation of historians, a picture can today be built of this remarkable civilization and their capital city. Although the city had been destroyed, the legacy of the Persians survived, even as they mostly remain an enigma to the West and are not nearly as well understood as the Greeks, Romans, or Egyptians. In a sense, the Achaemenid Persian Empire holds some of the most enduring mysteries of ancient civilization.

The Parthian people created an empire that lasted almost 500 years, from the mid-3rd century BCE until 224 CE, and it stretched from the Euphrates River in the west to Central Asia and the borders of Bactria in the east (Brosius 2010, 83). In fact, the expansive empire challenged the Romans on numerous occasions for supremacy in the Near East, created the first sustainable link between the peoples of Europe and East Asia, and followed a religion that many consider to be the oldest form of monotheism in the world; but despite these accomplishments the Parthians are often overlooked in favor of the Achaemenid and Sassanid Persians who came before and after them respectively, not to mention the Romans themselves. Although the Parthians may not get top billing in most popular histories of the period, they left an indelible mark on the world that cannot be overstated.

Perhaps part of the reason why the Parthians have been overshadowed by other peoples is due to the nature of the primary sources used to reconstruct their history. Although the Parthians were literate, they wrote no histories of their dynasty and most of the extant ancient historical sources are somewhat biased since they were written by Roman and Greek historians. The Greek and Roman historians provide excellent accounts of some of the battles between the Romans and Parthians, but they are for the most part limited to warfare and view the situations almost totally from the Roman perspective. The Parthians built a number of monuments, temples, and tombs so modern archaeological excavations help scholars reconstruct some aspects of their city and court life, but again the evidence is limited and only of limited use alone. Thus, to construct an accurate chronology of the Parthian dynasty, modern scholars are forced to combine the Roman and Greek historians with the available numismatic evidence from the Parthian period since the Parthians made different coins for the reigns of most of their kings (Brosius 2010, 80). All that said, when historians combine all of the available primary sources concerning the Parthians, not only can an accurate chronology of their dynasty be

compiled, but various aspects of their culture, such as economics and religion, are also made clear.

During the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE, an empire arose in Persia that extended its power and influence to Mesopotamia in the east, Arabia in the south, the Caucasus Mountains in the north, and as far east as India. This empire, known alternatively as the Sasanian Empire or Sassanid Empire, was the last of three great dynasties in Persia—the Achaemenid and the Parthian being the first two dynasties—before the rise of Islam. In fact, many scholars consider the Sasanian Empire to be the last great empire of the ancient Near East because once it had been obliterated, Islam became the standard religion of the region, ushering in the Middle Ages.

The Sasanian Empire was important for a number of reasons. Besides being the last of three great Persian dynasties, they carried on many Persian cultural traditions relating to religion and kingship. The Sasanians fostered and promoted the native religion of Zoroastrianism to the point of persecuting other religions from time to time. It was during the Sasanian period that the numerous Zoroastrian hymns, prayers, and rituals were collected under one book, known as the *Avesta*.

Thanks to the Sasanians' efforts with regard to religion, modern scholars know much more about Zoroastrianism than they would have if the religion continued to disseminate orally. Their efforts also protected Zoroastrian knowledge in later years after the dynasty was long gone and Islam became ascendant in Persia.

The Sasanians, like the Achaemenids and Parthians, also carried forth the Persian conflicts with the Hellenic world. Although the Achaemenids fought the Macedonian Greeks and the Parthians challenged the imperial Romans for control of Mesopotamia, the Sasanians faced Rome in its later stages of collapse and subsequently fought the revitalized Byzantine Empire. An examination of Sasanian chronology and culture reveals that it was a much more important dynasty and empire than most may think.

*The Empires of Ancient Persia: The History and Legacy of the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sassanids in Antiquity* looks at the three major empires, their importance, and their collapse. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about the empires like never before.

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## The Foundation of the Persian Empire

The Persians had humble beginnings among the Indo-European nomadic tribes that lived in the plains of central Eurasia. They originally coexisted alongside a number of prominent Indo-European tribes, including the Medes, Khwarezmians, Sogdians, Bactrians, and Heretians.<sup>[1]</sup> However, around 550 BCE, Cyrus, a tribal leader, set off on a campaign of conquests. With his charisma, and with what the Greeks called the “fear he inspired and the terror he struck in all men,” Cyrus took control of more and more territory, eventually overthrowing their primary rival, the Medes.<sup>[2]</sup>



**An engraving depicting Cyrus the Great**

Cyrus the Great, as he became known, subsequently founded the Persian Empire and reigned as the first king of the Achaemenid Dynasty from approximately 550-530 BCE. In just 30 years he laid the foundations of an empire whose borders would stretch from India in the east, to Greece on the Mediterranean, down to Egypt and Ethiopia, and north to what is now Russia. More than 30 different peoples were brought together under the rule of the man that called himself the “King of the World.”



### **A map depicting the enormous extent of the Achaemenid Empire**

Cyrus established his palace at the ancient city of Pasargadae. This site represented the birth of the Achaemenid rule, demonstrated Persian culture at its most sophisticated and refined, and influenced both the artistic and architectural layout and lifestyle of other urban centers in Persia. The city was founded in 550 BCE and served as the empire’s first capital, but it was later abandoned by the Persian kings in favor of Susa and Persepolis. Irrigation channels were dug into the earth, leading towards the city’s most stunning feature: its royal gardens.<sup>[3]</sup> The entire area in front of Cyrus’s residential palace was cultivated as a walled garden called the *pairidaēza* – a word that was later adopted by the Ancient Greek and Latin languages, and which gives English the modern word “paradise.”