

Empires and Civilizations in Collision: The Persians and the Greeks

The classical era in Eurasia witnessed the flowering of second-wave civilizations in the Mediterranean world, the Middle East, India, and China. For the most part, these distant civilizations did not directly encounter one another, as each established its own political system, cultural values, and ways of organizing society. A great exception to that rule lay in the Mediterranean world and in the Middle East, where the emerging Persian Empire and Greek civilization, physically adjacent to each other, experienced a centuries-long interaction and clash. It was one of the most consequential cultural encounters of the classical world.

The Persian Empire

In 500 B.C.E., the largest and most impressive of the world's empires was that of the Persians, an Indo-European people whose homeland lay on the Iranian plateau just north of the Persian Gulf. Living on the margins of the earlier Mesopotamian civilization, the Persians constructed an imperial system that drew upon previous examples, such as the Babylonian and Assyrian empires, but far surpassed them all in size and splendor. Under the leadership of the famous monarchs Cyrus (reigned 557–530 B.C.E.) and Darius (reigned 522–486 B.C.E.), Persian conquests quickly reached from Egypt to India, encompassing in a single state some 35 million people, an immensely diverse realm containing dozens of peoples, states, languages, and cultural traditions (see Map 4.1).

The Persian Empire centered on an elaborate cult of kingship in which the monarch, secluded in royal magnificence, could be approached only through an elaborate ritual. When the king died, sacred fires all across the land were extinguished, Persians were expected to shave their hair in mourning, and the manes of horses were cut short. Ruling by the will of the great Persian god Ahura Mazda, kings were absolute monarchs, more than willing to crush rebellious regions or officials. Interrupted on one occasion while he was with his wife, Darius ordered the offender, a high-ranking nobleman, killed, along with his entire clan. In the eyes of many, Persian monarchs fully deserved their effusive title—“Great king, King of kings, King of countries containing all kinds of men, King in this great earth far and wide.” Darius himself best expressed the authority of the Persian ruler when he observed: “what was said to them by me, night and day, it was done.”²

■ **Comparison**
How did Persian and Greek civilizations differ in their political organization and value

