

History

Historians are still debating when the first inhabitants settled in what is now Iran, but archaeologists suggest that during Neolithic times small numbers of hunters lived in caves in the Zagros and Alborz Mountains and in the southeast of the country.

THE ELAMITES & MEDES

Iran's first organised settlements were established in Elam, the lowland region in what is now Khuzestan province, as far back as the middle of the 3rd millennium BC. Elam was close enough to Mesopotamia and the great Sumerian civilisation to feel its influence, and records suggest the two were regular opponents on the battlefield. The Elamites established their capital at Shush (p214) and derived their strength through a remarkably enlightened federal system of government that allowed the various states to exchange the natural resources unique to each region. The Elamites' system of inheritance and power distribution was also quite sophisticated for the time, ensuring power was shared by and passed through various family lines.

The Elamites believed in a pantheon of gods, and their most notable remaining building, the enormous ziggurat at Choqa Zanbil (p215), was built around the 13th century BC and dedicated to the foremost of these gods. By the 12th century BC the Elamites are thought to have controlled most of what is now western Iran, the Tigris Valley and the coast of the Persian Gulf. They even managed to defeat the Assyrians, carrying off in triumph the famous stone inscribed with the Code of Hammurabi, a battered copy of which is in the National Museum of Iran (p104), the original having been carried off to the Louvre in Paris.

About this time Indo-European Aryan tribes began to arrive from the north. These Persians eventually settled in what is now Fars province, around Shiraz, while the Medes took up residence further north, in what is today northwestern Iran. The Medes established a capital at Ecbatana, now buried under modern Hamadan (p200), and first crop up in Assyrian records in 836 BC. But little more is heard of them until Greek historian Herodotus writes of how Cyaxares of Media expelled the Scythians, who had invaded from the Caucasus, in about 625 BC. According to Herodotus, whose histories are notoriously colourful, the Scythians were defeated when their kings attended a party and became so drunk they were easily disposed of.

Under Cyaxares, the Medes became a most formidable military force, repeatedly attacking the neighbouring Assyrians. In 612, having formed an alliance with the Babylonians, the Medes sacked the Assyrian capital of Nineveh and chased the remnants of this once-mighty empire into history. Exactly how the conquering powers divided the spoils of this heady success is uncertain, but it is believed the Medes assumed control of the highland territories. This meant that at his death in 575 BC Cyaxares is thought to have controlled an area that stretched from Asia Minor in the west as far as present-day Kerman in the east. Within a few years, though, this would seem very modest indeed.

THE ACHAEMENIDS & THE FIRST PERSIAN EMPIRE

In the 7th century BC the king of one of the Persian tribes, Achaemenes, created a unified state in southern Iran, giving his name to what would

Ancient Persia, by Josef Wiesehöfer, is a study of the country's origins and why it collapsed so dramatically after the Arab invasions of the 7th century.

IRAN'S DYNASTIES & NOTABLE RULERS**Achaemenids 550–330 BC****Cyrus II (the Great)** r 559–530 BC**Cambyses** r 529–522 BC**Darius I (the Great)** r 522–486 BC**Xerxes** r 486–465 BC**Artaxerxes I** r 465–425 BC**Darius II** r 424–405 BC**Artaxerxes II** r 405–359 BC

Capitals in Shush, Babylon & Persepolis

Seleucids 323–162 BC**Parthians 247 BC–AD 224****Mithridates** r 171–138 BC**Mithridates II** r 123–88 BC

Capitals in Rey and Ctesiphon

Sassanians AD 224–642**Ardashir I** r 224–41**Shapur I** r 241–72**Shapur II** r 310–79**Khusro II** r 590–628

Capitals at Firuz Abad, then Ctesiphon

Arabs & Turks arrive 642–1051**Umayyad Caliphate** r 642–750, capital in Damascus**Abbasid Caliphate** r 750–830s, capital in Baghdad 9th century, rule fragments**Tahirids**, r 820–72**Saffarids**, r 868–903**Samanids**, r 874–999**Ziarids**, r 928–1077**Buyids**, r 945–1055**Qaznavids**, r 962–1140**Seljuks 1051–1220****Toghrol Beik** r 1037–63**Malek Shah** r 1072–92

Capital in Esfahan

Mongol Ilkhanids 1256–1335**Hulagu Khan** r 1256–65**Ghazan Khan** r 1295–1304**Oljeitu Khan** r 1304–16

Capitals in Maraghe, Soltaniyeh

Timurids 1380–1502**Tamerlane** r 1380–1405**Shahrokh** r 1405–47

Govern from Samarkand, Herat and Qazvin

Safavids 1502–1736**Ismail Savafi** r 1502–24**Tahmasp** r 1524–76**Abbas I (Abbas the Great)** r 1587–1629

Capitals in Tabriz, Qazvin then Esfahan

Nader Shah 1736–1747

Capital in Mashhad

Zand Period 1750–1795**Karim Khan Zand** r 1750–79**Loft ali Khan** r 1779–95

Capital in Shiraz

Qajars 1795–1925**Aga Mohammad Khan** r 1795–6**Fath Ali Shah** r 1797–1834**Nasser al-Din Shah** r 1848–96

Capital in Tehran

Pahlavis 1925–1979**Reza Shah** r 1925–41**Shah Mohammad Reza** r 1941–79

become the First Persian Empire, that of the Achaemenids. By the time his 21-year-old great-grandson Cyrus II ascended the throne in 559 BC, Persia was clearly a state on the up. Within 20 years it would be the greatest empire the world had known.

Having rapidly built a mighty military force, Cyrus the Great (as he came to be known) ended the Median Empire in 550 BC when he defeated his own grandfather – the hated king Astyages – in battle at Pasargadae. Within 11 years, Cyrus had campaigned his way across much of what is now Turkey, east into modern Pakistan, and finally defeated the Babylonians. It was in the aftermath of this victory in 539 BC that Cyrus marked himself out as something of a sensitive, new age despot. Rather than putting the Babylonians to the sword, he released the Jews who had been held there and, according to Herodotus in *The Persian Wars*, declared, among other things, that he would 'respect the traditions, customs and religions of the nations of my empire and never let any of

my governors and subordinates look down on or insult them... I will impose my monarchy on no nation. Each is free to accept it, and if any one of them rejects it, I never resolve on war to reign.'

Cyrus colonised the old Median capital at Ecbatana, redeveloped Shush and built for himself a new home at Pasargadae (p284), establishing the pattern whereby Persian rulers circulated between three different capitals. Unfortunately for him, the Massagetae from the northeast of the empire decided he was indeed imposing his monarchy on them and they didn't like it. Herodotus writes that Cyrus incurred the wrath of the Massagetae queen, Tomyris, after he captured her son and slaughtered many of her soldiers in a battle made especially one-sided because the Massagetae army were all drunk – on wine strategically planted by the Achaemenids. Herodotus writes:

When Tomyris heard what had befallen her son and her army, she sent a herald to Cyrus, who thus addressed the conqueror: 'Thou bloodthirsty Cyrus, pride not thyself on this poor success: it was the grape-juice...it was this poison wherewith thou didst ensnare my child, and so overcamest him, not in fair open fight. Now hearken what I advise, and be sure I advise thee for thy good. Restore my son to me and get thee from the land unharmed... Refuse, and I swear by the sun, the sovereign lord of the Massagetae, bloodthirsty as thou art, I will give thee thy fill of blood'.

Cyrus paid no heed to Tomyris, who gathered all the forces of her kingdom for what Herodotus described as the fiercest battle the Achaemenids had fought. Cyrus and most of his army were slain. When his body was recovered she ordered a skin filled with human blood and, making good on her threat, dunked Cyrus's head in it. Cyrus's body was eventually buried in the mausoleum that still stands at Pasargadae (p284).

In 525 BC Cyrus's son, Cambyses, headed west to capture most of Egypt and coastal regions well into modern Libya. It was later recorded

Cyrus the Great, by Jacob Abbott, tells the story of the fair-minded empire builder through the writings of Greek historian Herodotus and general Xenophon, with extensive commentary from Abbott.

THE FIRST CHARTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS...OR NOT

In 1879, Assyro-British archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam unearthed a clay cylinder during a dig in the ancient Marduk temple of Babylon. What became known as the 'Cyrus Cylinder' bears a cuneiform inscription recording, among other things, that Cyrus 'strove for peace in Babylon and in all his [the god Marduk's] sacred sites' and 'abolished forced labour' for those (Jews) who had been enslaved in Babylon.

These passages have been widely interpreted as a reflection of Cyrus's respect for human rights, and many consider it the world's first charter of human rights. Indeed, a replica remains on permanent display at UN headquarters in New York (the original is in the British Museum), and in 1971 the cylinder became the symbol of the 2500th anniversary of Iranian royalty. However, not everyone agrees. Many scholars argue the cylinder is not a charter of human rights, but rather that such statements were common populism among kings at the time. They say that Mesopotamian kings had a tradition dating back to the 3rd millennium BC of making grand and popular statements espousing social reform when they came to the throne, meaning Cyrus's declaration was neither new nor unique.

Whether the cylinder was the world's first declaration of human rights or not, it seems fair to say that Cyrus was an unusually benevolent ruler for his time, and he's well-remembered across the faiths. In the Bible both Ezra and Isaiah speak of Cyrus as a benign ruler responsible for the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem. And he is the only Gentile (non-Jew) designated as a divinely appointed king, or messiah, in the Tanakh.