**The Persian Empire**

East of where Greek [civilization](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/0fe9ae0c-082e-4241-9d40-05ef6e1bc755) was developing, a new power was rising in present-day Iran. This new empire would become a major rival of the Greek [city-states](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/45629480-fce5-4b39-8010-07b431a67881) for land and power.

In approximately 548 BCE, Cyrus, also known as Cyrus the Great, united most of what is today Iran under his control and established himself as the ruler of [Persia](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/57332a5f-f0bd-48e2-bcea-1e0795676dee). He then began to expand his empire by conquering the surrounding lands. He conquered the Babylonian Empire (Mesopotamia), large areas of Central Asia, and Turkey. Darius I, a successor of Cyrus, continued to expand the Persian Empire. He captured northern India to the east, the kingdom of [Macedonia](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/50aa751f-aa9f-4b70-aacd-e1b5ebda208d) to the west, and the Greek islands of Lemnos and Imbros in the Aegean Sea. Darius and the previous Persian emperors had created one of the largest empires of the ancient world.

During his rule, Darius instituted many practices that allowed the Persians to control their large empire. He divided the empire into 23 satrapies, or provinces, and appointed a satrap, or governor, to rule each one. He introduced a single system of coins to use throughout the empire, making trade and other business transactions easier. The single monetary system also allowed Darius to collect tribute, or taxes, from each satrap each year. Darius improved infrastructure in his empire to allow traders and troops to move swiftly across the land. The Royal Road ran from the coast of the [Mediterranean Sea](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/74563f35-f4b0-45b1-a2dc-8f0a0fb5bf84) all the way to the capital of Persepolis, in modern southwestern Iran. Some parts of the Royal Road were even paved with stone.

Although Darius sought to unify his empire through common administrative and transportation systems, he also allowed each satrapy to retain its own culture. Darius usually allowed individual regions to keep their own laws and customs, although he occasionally scholars to modify laws that conflicted with the overall laws of the empire. Despite his attempts to maintain peace and order, not all members of the kingdom were happy with Persian rule.

During the conquests, led by Cyrus the Great and Darius I, the Persian Empire conquered most of Turkey, including the Greek colonies along the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts. This helped the Persians gain control of the Black Sea’s profitable trade routes. These colonies resented their Persian satraps and rebelled in 500 BCE. During the revolt, the Persian satraps in these colonies were exiled or killed, and the Greek inhabitants declared independence from the Persian Empire.

**Persia vs. Greece**

The Greek colonies along the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts maintained close contact with the [city-states](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/45629480-fce5-4b39-8010-07b431a67881) on the Greek [peninsula](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/d139a6da-ee8a-4dff-9f9b-b83dab8b2d58). When King Darius sent Persian troops to suppress, or stop, the rebellion in the Greek colonies, the Greek city-states of [Athens](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/7b9d3b38-048b-4d1e-af83-693d4a62da56) and Eretria sent boats and soldiers to aid the Greek rebels. This was the first in a series of wars between the Greek city-states and the Persian Empire, known as the Persian Wars.

The rebellion was defeated, and [Persia](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/57332a5f-f0bd-48e2-bcea-1e0795676dee) regained control of the territory. However, King Darius was concerned about the influence of the city-states on the Greek peninsula on the Greek colonies. He decided that to prevent future rebellions he would need to conquer all of [Greece](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/c479803e-9596-46cb-9c56-186422c913b3). Historians think Darius was also motivated by the opportunity to expand the Persian Empire even further by taking over Greece and its profitable trade routes.

### The Persian Wars

In 490 BCE King Darius sent a fleet of Persian ships to conquer [Greece](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/c479803e-9596-46cb-9c56-186422c913b3). The soldiers landed at the plain of Marathon, northeast of the [city-state](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/45629480-fce5-4b39-8010-07b431a67881) of [Athens](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/7b9d3b38-048b-4d1e-af83-693d4a62da56). The Persian army was larger than any Greek army, but they had problems getting supplies to their troops across the Aegean Sea, which could be dangerous to travel. An early attempt at invasion in 492 BCE by the Persians had ended when many of the Persian ships were destroyed in a storm. The natural protection of the sea was a great advantage to the Greek city-states.

Despite early Persian victories, a few combined Greek city-states were able to beat the Persian army at the battle of Marathon. After the defeat at Marathon, the Persian troops retreated back to their empire. Legend has it that an Athenian man ran from the battle of Marathon all the way back to Athens to share news of the victory. The first modern marathon race, which was run at the 1896 Olympics in Athens, mirrored the route of this legendary ancient Athenian.

The Persian army returned to Greece in 480 BCE, 10 years after the battle of Marathon, under the command of King Xerxes, the son of Darius. Xerxes not only sought to revenge his father’s defeat at Marathon but, like his father, he also wanted to establish Greece as a Persian province and gain control of its trading network. Unlike his father, however, Xerxes traveled not over sea, but instead marched his armies around the Aegean Sea and invaded the Greek [peninsula](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/d139a6da-ee8a-4dff-9f9b-b83dab8b2d58) from the north. Meanwhile, the Persian navy sailed south along the Greek coast line.

Because of the size of the Persian army, which historians estimate at 360,000 men, and the rocky and hilly terrain of Greece, the Persian army moved slowly. This gave the Greek city-states time to prepare a strategy for battle. The Greek city-states worked together to try and stop Xerxes’ march southward. The Athenians, who had a fleet of warships, were charged with destroying the Persian fleet, while the formidable Spartan army was sent to stop the Persian ground forces.

The Spartans met the Persians at the battle of Thermopylae with a force of about 7,000 men. The Greeks decided to fight in a narrow canyon, where the Persians could only send a few soldiers at a time, which limited the advantage the Persians had because of the size of their army. However, a Greek soldier betrayed the Spartans and showed the Persians how to circle around behind the Spartan army. Trapped on both sides, the Spartan commander decided to let most of his army flee and prepared to hold off the Persians with only 300 Spartan soldiers as well as soldiers from Thespiae and [Thebes](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/4efb92f9-c030-4fae-b6ef-7284a1e41571). Although all the soldiers who remained behind died in the battle, they held off the Persian army for about a day and allowed the rest of the Greek troops to escape.

After the Persian victory at Thermopylae, Xerxes’ army conquered Athens and burned it to the ground. Most Athenians were able to flee the city to nearby islands in advance of Xerxes’ army. However, a battle at sea would change the course of the war.

### The End of the Wars

Although the [city-state](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/45629480-fce5-4b39-8010-07b431a67881) of [Athens](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/7b9d3b38-048b-4d1e-af83-693d4a62da56) had been conquered, the Athenian navy was still intact. The Greek fleet was made up of ships called triremes. The design of these ships allowed the Greeks to travel quickly between and around the islands. They also had sharp points on the end designed for ramming enemy ships.

In 480 BCE, the Greeks lured the Persian fleet into a narrow channel between the mainland near Athens and the Greek island of Salamis, knowing that the speed and maneuverability of their ships, along with their knowledge of the waters, would give them a significant advantage. The larger Persian ships could not move as effectively in such a narrow space, allowing the Greeks to ram multiple Persian ships and eventually win the battle of Salamis.

The defeat at Salamis discouraged the Persians. They waited until the next spring to attack the Greeks again but lost the battle of Plataea. The Persian army withdrew, and the [Persian Wars](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/33de7605-f544-49e7-a562-c55a80db7b8e) were over. [Greece](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Aconcept/view/guidConceptId/99aa1148-60d9-4292-af0d-c9f8f28275ff/guidUnitId/c479803e-9596-46cb-9c56-186422c913b3) would remain independent from the Persian Empire. Whether at the cliffs of Thermopylae or on the seas surrounding Greece, the Greeks’ knowledge of the terrain played an important part in their victories against the Persians.

The geography of Greece not only aided in its protection but also contributed to all factors of Greek life. The agriculture, trade, and governments of ancient Greece were all influenced by the geography of the region.