

Chapter 7: New Civilizations and Empires in Western and Central Asia: 7-3 The Persians

Book Title: World Civilizations

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7-3 The Persians

Until the twentieth century, present-day Iran was called *Persia*. For a millennium—500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E.—they and the three dynasties (that is, the Achaemenids, the Parthians, and the Sassanians) that ruled them were the most powerful of the many peoples in western Asia.

Iran is mostly a high, arid plateau (the *Iranian Plateau*), surrounded on the north, west, and east by high mountains and on the south by the Indian Ocean (see [Map 7.1](#)). For a long time the country had been a natural dividing point for the Silk Road, which joined the eastern Mediterranean to China and India. Later it became the great exchange point between the Arabic-Muslim and the Indic-Hindu worlds. Thanks to this strategic position, Iran and the [Iranians \(Indo-European pastoral nomads who settled the Iranian Plateau and unified c. 850 B.C.E., forming a powerful kingdom that played a crucial part in the history of the ancient Near East. Closely related to the Aryans of India; another name for Persians.\)](#) (or Persians) have long played a considerable role in world affairs, as will be seen in [Chapters 11 and 12](#).

The case of the Persians, and their cousins the *Aryans* who settled in India ([Chapter 4](#)), provides another example of wandering pastoralists who conquered and then eventually settled regions that supported agriculture. They were an Indo-European-speaking people who had migrated slowly south from the Central Asian steppes into Iran. Actually, several related groups, collectively termed *Iranians*, moved south starting between 1500 and 1000 B.C.E. At this epoch they were still nomadic and knew nothing of agriculture or other civilized crafts and techniques. They did, however, possess large numbers of horses, and their skill at cavalry tactics enabled them to gradually overcome their rivals for territorial mastery. Eventually, through both war and trading contacts with their Mesopotamian neighbors to the west, they learned the basics of agriculture and a sedentary civilized life. These Iranian tribes unified and began consolidating their power around 850 B.C.E. As they extended their power over other peoples, they developed methods to support their growing influence, including the creation of a capital named *Persepolis* (per-SEH-poh-lihs).

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