

SECTION 3 The Persians

Originally, the Persians were part of the people known as Aryans. The Aryans were cattle herders from the grasslands of central Asia. About 2000 B.C., however, the Persians began to separate from other Aryans. They finally settled on a high plain between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, where they established Persia. Today, this region is called Iran (i ran'), or "the land of the Aryans." Modern Persians are Iranians (ir ā' nē uhnz).

The Persians lived peacefully in the highlands for over 1,000 years. They divided most of the country into large farms owned by nobles. The nobles spent most of their time riding horses and practicing archery. Their farms were worked by laborers.

There was little water on the hot plain. Farmers depended on streams that came down from the mountains. They dug underground tunnels from the springs to the fields. With water, farmers were able to grow wheat and barley and to pasture flocks of fat-tailed sheep.

Army and Empire About 600 B.C., the Persians were conquered by the Medes (mēdz), a neighboring people. The Medes, however, were soon overthrown by the Persians under King Cyrus (sī' ruhs). Cyrus then organized an army to conquer new territory. The army grew until it numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Its officers were Persians, while its soldiers were either Persians or conquered peoples.

The best fighters in the Persian army were the Immortals. They earned this name because their number never fell below 10,000. When an Immortal became sick, was wounded, or died, another soldier took his place. The Immortals had the honor of leading the Persian army into battle.

Within a short time, the Persians ruled an empire that stretched from Egypt to India. The Persians were mild rulers who allowed their subjects to keep their own language, religion, and laws. The Persians believed loyalty could be won more easily with fairness than with fear or force. They wanted their subjects to pay taxes and to produce goods for trade. They felt these things would not be done if those under their rule were treated badly.

One of the strongest Persian kings was Darius (duh rī' uhs). He wanted a monument to honor his military victories. So, he brought artisans from many lands to build a grand palace-fortress-treasury in the capital city of Persepolis (puhr sep' uh luhs). Buildings with many columns were constructed on giant stone