

Name _____ Date _____

The Persian Empire

“Like a Persian”

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Various groups had populated Persia, the land we now call Iran, by 600 BCE. The west of the country was mountainous, with green valleys and rugged peaks that gave way to desert sands in the east. The different groups who lived there were brought together under the leadership of Cyrus the Great (585-529 BCE). When he took power, the kingdom was relatively small. Within 20 years, Cyrus set up the largest empire the world had ever seen, a vast territory that went all the way from the Himalayas to what is now Turkey and down past Israel to the Arabian Peninsula. His successors would build an even larger army and expand the empire farther still, taking Egypt and parts of India and Greece.

Notes

2. Cyrus was one of the world’s finest military men—he conquered the Babylonians, Assyrians, Jews, Syrians, Phoenicians, Lydians and Turks Greeks. The Persian army was led by a group of 10,000 soldiers called the Immortals. They must have seemed immortal because everywhere they went, they were unstoppable. Part of their success was due to the incredible loyalty they had for Cyrus, but they also had a fast cavalry that struck with speed. The cavalry, or mounted warriors, attacked not only with horses but with bows and arrows as well—the same technique that the armies of Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan would later use so devastatingly.

Notes

3. Cyrus allowed the cultures that he incorporated into his empire to practice their religions and continue their traditions. Because of this, Cyrus was respected by many of the groups that he conquered and united, but he was especially important to the Jews. He issued a kind of emancipation proclamation freeing the Jews from slavery. He told them to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. For this reason, one Jewish prophet at that time referred to Cyrus as a "messiah," a leader chosen by God. He is the only non-Jew to get this distinction. Cyrus also created an artifact known as the Cyrus cylinder, a cylinder-shaped stone covered in writing. It was written in cuneiform, and it recounted his belief that people should be free to worship their own gods and practice their own traditions. Some historians have traced the ideas in America's Bill of Rights back to the Cyrus cylinder.

Notes

4. Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the Persian Empire. Zarathustra, the founder of Zoroastrianism, was a contemporary or near-contemporary of Cyrus the Great and Darius I. He was a prophet who had visions, and one of the first to propose that there was only a single god in the centuries before Jesus. Zarathustra's philosophy was strongly based on good and evil. Some religious scholars have noted similarities between Zoroastrianism and Hindu texts. Some people in India and Iran continue to practice the faith.

Notes

5. After Cyrus died, his son Cambyses took the throne. His father had conquered the Middle East, and so Cambyses thought he should try to conquer Egypt, the only remaining independent state in that part of the world. Cambyses went to Egypt and left his brother Smerdis in charge of running the eastern provinces. Cambyses conquered Egypt with his mighty army. Some accounts say that having killed the pharaoh, Cambyses started to dress in the pharaoh's clothes. Back in Persia, Cambyses's brother was grabbing power in Asia and proclaiming himself the Persian emperor. Some people claimed that the man doing this wasn't even the real Smerdis at all, but an imposter; they said the real Smerdis was already dead. Either way, Cambyses was scared to march against "Smerdis", and he began struggling mentally and emotionally. During this time, Cambyses either died by accident or he killed himself.

Notes

6. Darius stepped up and led the army against Smerdis, killing him and claiming the throne. Darius was only loosely related to Cambyses and Cyrus, but in 521 he became emperor anyway. He became known as “the shopkeeper” because he introduced coined money and a good postal service. He divided the empire into easy-to-manage states and moved the capital to the city of Persepolis. But Darius wanted more territory. In 490 BC, he attacked Greece, whose empire bordered his on his western flank. He was unhappy with the Greeks for siding with the Ionians, who had rebelled against his control. This was called the First Persian War, or First Greco-Persian War.

Notes

7. In the First Persian War, the Persian force landed at Marathon. Despite fighting a much larger army, the Greeks eventually won. The idea of a marathon (a 26.2-mile run) comes from this time, as a Greek messenger ran the 26 miles to Athens to tell the city of the victory—before he collapsed and died. Most soldiers standing on their feet were no match for the Persian cavalry, warriors on horseback. To change that, the Greeks developed the hoplites, a type of Greek foot soldier. These soldiers had large shields and long spears and would group themselves very closely together in what is known as a phalanx formation. When cavalry came charging in, the hoplites would raise their weapons at an angle, creating a virtual wall of spears.

Notes

8. The Second Persian War began 10 years later when Darius’s son Xerxes wanted revenge on the Greeks. Xerxes built up the Persian army even more. Herodotus, a famous Greek historian, wrote that Xerxes’s army, some two million men, would drink entire rivers dry. He attacked by land and sea against a coalition of Greek cities, including the Athenians, Spartans and Corinthians. Amazingly, a scrappy group of Greek warriors was able to fight off the giant army that had conquered all of the Middle East. Most famously, a group of 300 Spartans held off thousands of Persian soldiers at Thermopylae, a narrow passage between cliffs. When one Spartan heard that the Persians were so numerous that their arrows would “blot out the sun,” he replied, “Then we will fight in the shade.” Even today, “in the shade” is the motto of a division in the Greek army.

Notes