ANCIENT PERSIA

Timeline
2000-1800 BCE

Aryans Arrive from North
The **Aryans** were a **migratory group of tribes** who originated near modern day Russia. Between 2000 bce and 1800 bce they moved into the region of modern day Iran. The tribe that settled in the north, near the Caspian Sea, was known as the **Medes** and the tribe that settled in the south, near the Persian Sea, was known as the **Persians**.

The Persians called their land “**Fars**”, which is still the name a state in modern day Iran. The word **Farsi**, which is the Language spoken in modern Iran, comes from the word Fars. The name Iran comes from the old perisan word Airyana, meaning “land of the Aryans”.
1500-600 BCE
Birth of Zoroaster
**Zarathushtra**, known as Zoroaster by the Greeks, was the first known prophet for a monotheistic religion. Before Zoroaster, the Persians worshiped many different gods and goddesses. **Zoroaster spoke on behalf of one, all powerful god.**

Zoroaster believed that one could go to heaven or paradise by having **Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds**. This was a new idea in religion. At the time, if people wanted good things to happen during their life they would give gifts to the gods and if they wanted good things in the afterlife they would be buried with them when they died.

Zoroaster also taught that there was a battle of good and evil in the world. Good was controlled by an **all powerful god called Ahura Mazda** and evil was controlled by Angra Mainyu.
The Achaemenid (ack-a-med) Persian Empire was a first in many ways.

**It was a largest empire at the time.** At it’s largest, the Empire stretched from Egypt to the Indus River Valley. **It was also said to be the first multicultural, humane and religiously tolerant empire.** This meant that to be part of the empire you did not have to “become Persian”. All that was required was to agree that the King of Persia was also your king. **The Empire ended slavery within it’s boarders.** This is most famously seen when Cyrus the Great freed the Jews from Babylon. **And finally, it’s government structure was first known federal system.** Meaning that Empire was made up of many different states. Each states was run by a king who was under the “King of Kings”. Each state could have it’s own laws, education system, language, religion and military. The only rule was that each state must send taxes and military to the “King of Kings” when needed.
540 BCE – Cyrus the Great Conquers Babylon
Cyrus the Great began building his empire after conquering the Medes in northern Iran. He then set his eyes on Babylon – the capital city of Mesopotamia. What Cyrus did once conquering Babylon set the tone and expectation of the empire: tolerance.

Cyrus the Great had a cylinder made of clay and his message to the people was written in Babylonian cuneiform – not Persian cuneiform – so that all of Mesopotamian would understand. His message was simple: all enslaved people were to be set free. This meant that the thousand of Jews and other people that the Babylonians had enslaved could now return to their homeland.
Pasargadae Becomes the Capital of Persia
Pasargadae (pars-ar-god) was a magnificent palace built for King Cyrus the Great. It became the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. This also the location of the tomb of Cyrus the Great.
530 bce – Cyrus the Great Dies
530BCE – 522BCE Cambyses II is King
Cambyses II was the son of Cyrus the Great and became the ruler of the Achaemenid Persian Empire after the death of his father. While his father was still alive, Cambyses was put in charge of the city of Babylon. He is best known for expanding the empire into Egypt.

There is great debate surrounding the death of Cambyses and the empire was a state of rebellion at the time. Some historians believe that he was killed by a man pretending to be his brother. Others believe that he was killed by Darius, a spearman in Cambyses’ army. Another belief is that Cambyses accidently killed himself by falling on a spear.
522 BCE – 486 BCE – Darius is King of Persia
After the death of Cambyses, Darius control over the Persian Empire. He did so by bringing peace to the rebellious empire. He had been known as a skillful spearman and was greatly respected. **Darius is also known as Darius the Great** since he was a wise ruler during a height of the empire. He is best known for setting up a form of government where different parts of the empire were controlled by “satraps” who ruled under him. This system allowed the empire to remain multicultural. Darius also started using gold coins in trade called a “daric” and he standardized measurements. Under his rule roads, palaces and canals were built to improve the empire.

King Darius expanded the Achaemenid Persian Empire to the Indus River and attempted to expand into Greece. However, he unsuccessful against the Athenian army in the Battle of Marathon.
Persepolis Becomes the Capital of Persia
After becoming King, Darius ordered the construction of a new palace and capital which would become known as Persepolis. Persepolis is known for its beautiful Achaemenid architectural style consisting of tall columns, relief carvings, and large gates. The most famous gate is known as the “Gate of All Nations”. The palace was made of stone and wood.

Today the ruins of Perspolis are protected and celebrated as an UNESCO World Heritage Site.
515 bce – Construction of Royal Road Begins
The Persian Royal Road
- 1,700 miles from Susa to Sardis by going through Arbela (near Neneveh)
- Stations with fresh horses every 15 miles
- Took 7 days to travel with a letter from Susa to Sardis
The Royal Road was a network of roads throughout the Persian Empire. King Darius ordered the construction of the roads. The longest stretch of road went from Sardes (modern day Turkey) to Susa (modern day northern Iran). Along the road there were rest stops about every 15 miles where messengers and travelers could sleep, exchange horses or pick up supplies. There were also guards along the main road for protection. It is said that the fastest royal horsemen could transport a message the 1,700 miles from Sardes to Susa in seven days.

The roads were made of packed gravel and stone. The picture to the right shows the remains of a part of the Royal Road in northern Iran and a rest stop.
498 BCE

Darius’ Canal is Completed
Along with roads, King Darius also ordered the building of a canal which would join the eastern branch of the Nile River and the Red Sea. The canal was built by Egyptian stone cutters and canal builders. Unlike many empires, the Persians did not use salves. Skilled workers were employed to construct roads, canals and other large building projects.

The Darius Canal, also known as the Canal of the Pharaohs, was 130 miles long and took 7 years to complete. The canal was written about by both the Greeks and the Egyptians.
490 bce

Darius Attacks the Greeks at Marathon
King Darius had successfully expanded the Persian Empire in all directions and now had his sites set on the Greek City-States since they had encouraged the Ionian people to rebel against the satrap that Darius had appointed to rule over them.

Darius himself is said to have not been at the Battle of Marathon (a Greek City–State), but he did lead the invasion from afar. It has been written that Darius sent 600 ships with about 20,000 soldiers – mostly archers – across the Mediterranean Sea to
attack the Athenians. The Athenians were greatly out numbered with only 10,000 soldiers. Legend has it that an Athenian general sent one soldier to run for help. He ran 26 miles before reaching Sparta to ask for their assistance against the Persians.

It has been recorded that the Persians has been winning the battle for a period of time, until they pushed the Athenians further into country side. The Athenian army then split into two and was able to defeat the Persian army. It is also rumored that the Athenian general Callimachus had once fought against King Darius and the Persians and knew how they could be defeated even though they were out numbered.

*Note - The accounts of the Battle of Marathon were written by Greek historians.
486 bce

Xerxes Becomes King
King Darius the Great died in 486 BCE, however, before he died he chose his son Xerxes to become his successor (the next king). He did this so that there would not be a battle for the throne. It is believed that Xerxes was chosen over his other brothers to come king because his mother had been the daughter of Cyrus the Great. Because of this, Xerxes would not have to prove himself since his was a descendent of Cyrus the Great.
481 bce

Xerxes Attacks the Greek City-States
The defeat of the Persian army at Marathon was fresh in the mind of King Xerxes. He wanted to avenge his father and expand the Persian empire into the Greek-City States.

Legend has it that the advisers of Xerxes had seen an eclipse and took it as a warning of defeat. Xerxes chose to ignore this warning and took his army of 2 million soldiers on 4 thousand ships across the Mediterranean Sea to Greece. In the first battles the Persians easily defeated the Greeks and they marched their way into Athens.

Xerxes defeated the Athenians without much resistance, and in a fit of rage because of what had happened at Marathon, Xerxes ordered the city of Athens to be burnt to the ground. It is written that he immediately regretted his decision and ordered that the
city be rebuilt and paid for by the Persian Empire.

The remaining battles with the Greeks were not as successful. Soon the Persian soldiers had met their match and where defeated at the Battle of Salamis – a battle on the sea. Xerxes and his remaining men retreated back to the Persian controlled land with no supplies and only a few thousand men remaining.

The Persians were once again unsuccessful in conquering the Greek City-States and expanding their empire.
330 BCE – Alexander the Great Conquers Persepolis and the Persian Empire
Alexander the Great, King of Macedonia (north of Greece), conquered the Greek City-State. After he took his army and marched into Persia. He met the Persian army in the city of Guagemala, also known as Arbela (modern day northern Iraq). Alexander won and he continued to march his army to Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. The city of Susa surrendered without a fight. The Persian Empire had fallen to Alexander the Great. After Susa, Alexander marched to Persepolis – the beautiful palace built by Darius the Great and burnt it to the ground as revenge for Xerxes burning the Acropolis in Athens.

So why would a Macedonian King care that Xerxes burnt Athens? When Alexander that Great was a young boy, he tutored by the Athenian scholar, Aristotle. It was because of this was Alexander that Great loved Greek culture and wanted to protect and spread it over the known world.
171 BCE

Parthians Start to Take Back the Empire from the Greeks
After Alexander the Great conquered Persia, the Seleucid dynasty (ruling family) spread Greek culture throughout the once Persian Empire. Around 171 bce, the Parthians, a group of nomads who took over the former Persian satrapy of Parthia. From there they slowly took back more land.

The Parthians wanted to reduce the Greek influence that had spread throughout Persia. To do so they experimented with new architectural styles and invented the iwan – a three sided brick hallway with high curved ceiling. This building style served as a natural cooling system during the hot summers.
53 ce

Parthians Defeat Romans at Carrhae
The Parthians often fought with the Roman Empire. In 53 ce, the Roman Empire attempted to take over the Parthian Empire and the lands of Persia.

At the Battle of Carrhae the Persians were greatly out numbered 4 to 1. However, they Romans where no match for the Parthian archers. Parthian archers on horseback were so skilled that they could shoot arrows over their shoulders as they road away from their enemy. This maneuver in archery is known as the Parthian shot.
224 CE

Sasanians Take Control of the Empire
The Parthians were conquered by a leader from the Persian heartland of Fars. The leader claimed to be descended from a noble named Sasan. This the empire was called the Sassanian Persian Empire. The Sassanians wanted to restore the glory of the old Achaemenid Persian Empire. They often fought with Roman and the Byzantium Empire.

They also restored Zoroastrianism as the state religion.
642 CE
Arabs Conquer the Sasanians and Islam is Introduced to Persia
In 622 ce, the monotheistic religion of Islam was founded by the Prophet Muhammad on the Arabian Peninsula. Very quickly the followers of Muhammad began to spread the religion around the region (Middle East).

In 642 ce the Arab people set out to conquer the Persian Empire with the goal to spread Islam as well as to take over trade. The Persian people were converted to Islam, but they were not made to take on Arab culture. Rather, Persian literature, art, music, architecture and scholarship has greatly influenced Islamic culture world wide.
Resources

http://www.persepolis.nu/timeline.htm#achaemenid
http://www.ancient.eu/persepolis/
http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=327188&partId=1
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parthian_Empire
http://www.ducksters.com/history/mesopotamia/persian_empire.php
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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamization_of_Iran