



HANDOUT 1

The Persian Empire

By 500 B.C., the Persian Empire included the lands of Anatolia, Egypt, Libya, Thrace, Macedonia, Mesopotamia, the Indus River Valley, and Syria. The empire was created through military conquests that demanded a large standing army.

The vast empire was connected by the Royal Road, which extended over 1,500 miles from Susa, one of the Persian capitals, to Sardis, capital of Lydia in Asia Minor. Along the road, the Persians built more than 100 supply stations and inns where travelers could stop for food and lodging.

The official language of the Persian Empire was Aramaic, the language of the Assyrians. The Assyrians had created an empire by 650 B.C. that included much of Mesopotamia, Syria, the western Mediterranean, northern Egypt, and part of eastern Asia Minor. However, in 609 B.C. the Assyrians were defeated by an alliance that included the Persians and Medes. In 585 B.C., the Medes defeated the Persians in battle; after this defeat, a Persian prince married the daughter of the Mede ruler. The union produced Cyrus the Great, who, in approximately 547 B.C., began to build the greatest empire that had ever existed in the Middle East — the Persian Empire.

The decision to proclaim Aramaic as the language of the Persian Empire promoted communication and commerce throughout the region. This common language now permitted scribes to communicate from one end of the empire to the other, thus stimulating commerce and creativity.

Commerce was further stimulated through the circulation of Persian coins that were accepted by everyone throughout the empire.

A stable and efficient government provided an environment that encouraged creativity and allowed the abilities, talents, and skills of diverse people to flourish. Greek architects, stonemasons, and sculptors worked to build the king's palaces. The people of the Indus Valley introduced rice. Merchants of all descriptions carried trade goods on the Royal Road under the protection of the army.