

# Pre-Achaemenid History

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# Content Covered in this Presentation

- Pre-Achaemenid History is an extremely expansive topic which spans several millenia
- In this presentation, we have chosen to focus on several aspects of this history, including: the Pre-Median timeline in Persia, the Median Empire, the birth of Zarathustra, and the origin of one of Persia's most iconic symbols, the Faravahar

# Paleolithic+Mesolithic+Neolithic Ages (until 5500 BCE)

- 10,000 BCE: Excavations near Sari reveal evidence of highly civilized peoples
- 8,000 BCE: Excavations at Susa support those found at Sari, residue of red wine
- Mesolithic Period: shift from nomadism to domestication of animals and reaping of plants
- 6000 BCE: Excavations near Tehran reveal a fire temple

# Copper Age (5500 to 3500 BCE)

- Proto-Indian Iranians: An ancient sub-tribe of the great Indo-European tribe; nomadic pastoralists who herded cattle and were consistently on the move
- Lived on the South Russian Steppes between 4000 and 3000 BCE
- Another notable from Copper Age: cuneiform script first developed (3400 BCE)



# Bronze Age (3000 to 1350 BCE)

- During the Bronze Age, a rift occurred between the Proto-Indo Iranians
- Vedic Aryans; southeast towards India and Pakistan
- Iranians; south towards Persia and Media
- Sanskrit and Avestan are extremely similar; indicates the two groups were originally one

# Bronze Age (3000 to 1350 BCE)

- Separation resulted in demonization of opposite deities
- Iranian Gods=Indian Demons, and vice versa
- Indian Demons= **Ashuras**, Iranian God=**Ahura** Mazda
- Iranian Demons=**Devas**, Indian Gods=**Devas**
- Pan/**demon**/ium-Jaan Puhvel for mutual demonization

# Kayanian Dynasty

- Kai Kavad-founded the Kayanian Dynasty
- Kai Lohrasp- founded city of Balkh; father of Vishtaspa
- Kai Vishtaspa: strongly promoted the religion of Zarathustra
- Prince Esfandiyar: A great warrior who spread Zoroastrianism throughout the ancient world
- Kai: signifies a king of the Kayanian dynasty



# Median Empire



# What was the Median Empire?

- By all historical accounts, the Median Empire is the closest to a precursor to the Achaemenian Empire.
- The Median Empire lasted from 678 B.C.E. until 549 B.C.E., at which point it was conquered by Cyrus the Great.



# How did the Median Empire form?

- From 911 BCE until the rise of the Median Empire, the Medes, Persians, and other Iranian peoples were subject to the Neo Assyrian Empire
- Deioces unified the Median state and therefore is considered the first true 'king' of the Median Empire.

# Capital



- Ecbatana/Hamgmatana
- “The Place of Gathering”
- Chosen as the Medes’ Capital by Deioces in late 8th Century B.C.E.
- Excavations of Ecbatana have been minimal, due to the fact that the site is overbuilt by modern-day Hamadan.

# History of Excavations



- Charles Fossey-first to excavate Ecbatana.
- Described as similar to Persepolis
- Accidental discovery of defensive wall
- Achaemenid column bases discovered in early 1970s.



<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Hamedan,+Hamadan,+Iran/@34.8059385,48.5156204,534m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x3ff1ecc4b3aab593:0x7b0b82ddf4074b5b!8m2!3d34.7988575!4d48.5150225>

# Ecbatana after the Medes

- Summer Capital for Achaemenid Empire
- Satrapal seat for the province of Media



Present Day Location of Ecbatana, in Hamadan Province, Iran, in the Zagros Mountains



# Religion



- No documents to refer to about this aspect
- Initially, a form of Mazdaism/Mithraism was the primary religion
- Zoroastrianism was practiced in the later years of this empire's reign.

# Language

- The people of this empire spoke the Median Language, one of the Old Iranian Languages.
- Historians speculate that the Median Government maintained historical archives in Ecbatana, similar to the Achaemenid rulers; remains unconfirmed.
- Deioces passed judgements in writing.

# Kings of the Median Empire

728–675 BCE [Deioces](#)

675–653 BCE [Phraortes](#)

624–585 BCE [Cyaxares](#)

584–550 BCE [Astyages](#)

Disclaimer: All dates on this slide are based on Herodotus

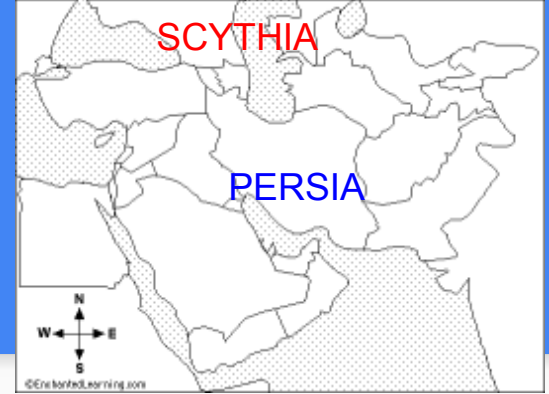
# Deioces

- According to Herodotus, Deioces was the founder of the Median Royal Dynasty and the first Median King to gain independence from Assyria.
- Deioces ruled from 700 to 647 B.C.E.
- The people in his own and other villages often chose him to arbitrate disputes, and eventually selected him as their King.
- His people first built him a palace, and then the capital of Ecbatana (modern day Hamadan)

# Phraortes

- The Son of Deioces, he ruled the Median Empire from 647 to 625 B.C.E.
- Like his father, he started wars against Assyria, and was eventually defeated and killed by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal

# Scythian Interregnum



- Between the reigns of Phraortes and Cyaxares, the Scythian nomads invaded the Median Empire from the north
- After about thirty years of Scythian rule in Media, Cyaxares was able to drive out the warlike nomads.
- Under pressure from Cyaxares, the Scythians withdrew from Western Iran and went to plunder other lands

# Cyaxares

- The son of Phraortes, he was the third king of Media, but only ruled after the Scythians had been driven out
- According to Herodotus, Cyaxares was ‘the most capable King of Media’; he was a stellar military commander, and the first to divide his troops into distinct sections of spearmen, archers, and horsemen
- After Phraortes died, the Scythians overran Media.
- Cyaxares repelled the Scythians and allied himself with King Nabopolassar of Babylon, in order to mutually defeat the Assyrians.
- Succeeded by his son Astyages

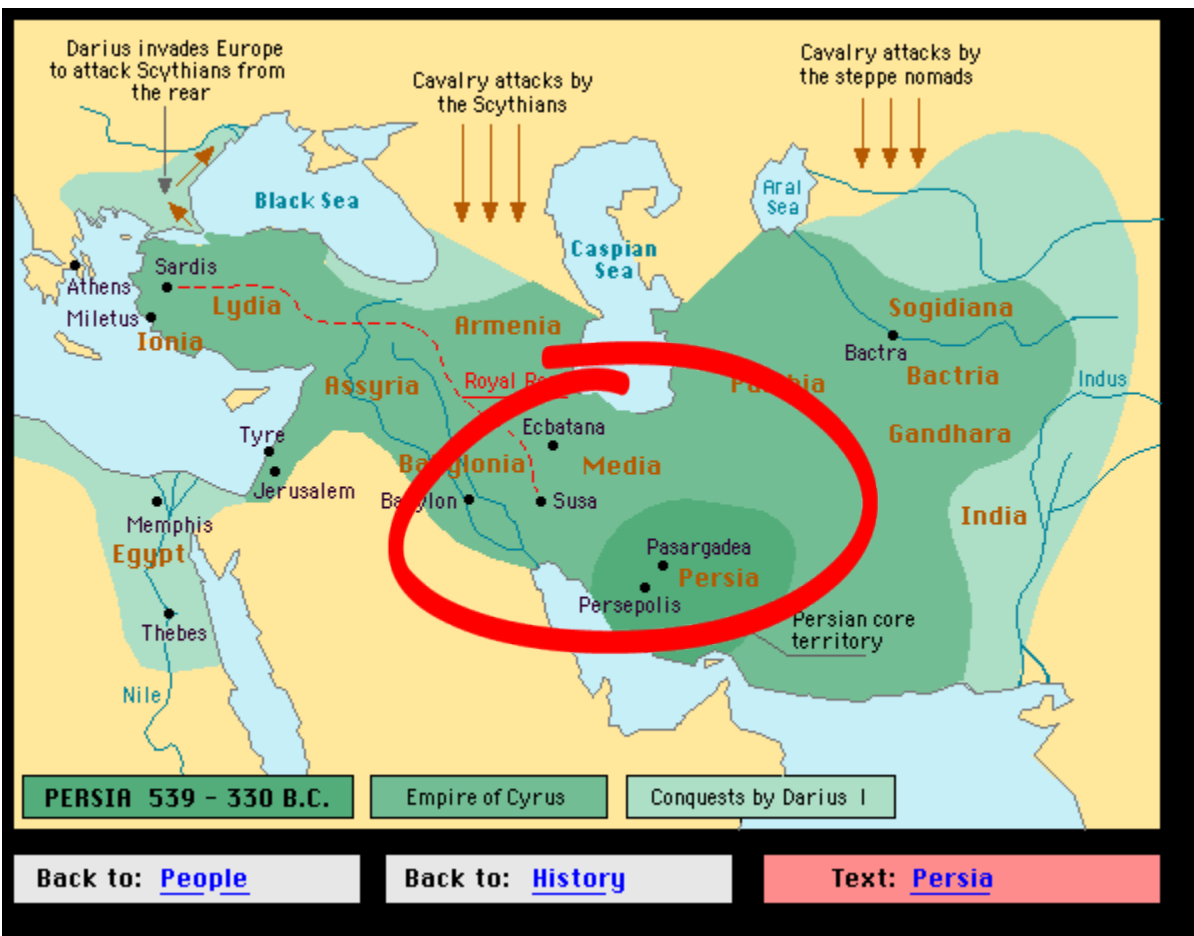
# Astyages

- The last King of the Median Empire
- Son of Cyaxares, ruled from 585 to 550 B.C.E., when he was dethroned by his own grandson, Cyrus, after the Battle of Pasargadae
- He was betrayed on the battlefield by one of his generals, most likely Harpagus-since Harpagus was Astyages' general at the battle, and Harpagus went on to become Cyrus' most successful generals, it is likely he had something to do with the mutiny



# What Happened to the Median Empire?

- In 553 B.C.E., Cyrus rose in rebellion against the Medes.(due to their mismanagement of Persis)
- After a decisive victory over Astyages in 550 B.C.E., the Median King was captured by his own nobles, who turned him over to Cyrus.
- Despite the fall of their Empire, many Medes retained positions in Achaemenian Government, and were employed as officials, satraps, and generals.



Median soldier  
with rounded  
helmets and  
boots



Persian soldier

Relief from Apadana Hall-Achaemenid Era carving of Median and Persian Soldiers

# Zarathustra

- Where was Zarathustra Born?
- Around what time did Zarathustra Live?
- How did Zoroastrianism spread throughout the Ancient World?

# Where was Zarathustra Born?

- Zarathustra was likely born in Bactria, a region located in present-day Afghanistan
- There are some accounts which claim he was born near present-day Tehran, however.



# How King Vishtasp became a follower of Zoroastrianism

- King Vishtasp was the son of King Lohrasp; instrumental in spreading religion
- Vishtasp-first patron of Zoroastrianism
- After Zarathustra arrived in the court of King Vishtasp, he was jailed after accusations from other jealous ministers.
- Zarathustra then cured Vishtasp's favorite horse and won the king's favor.

# Around What Time did Zarathustra Live?

- There are many conflicting ideas on when Zarathustra lived, due to a lack of a proven source.
- Zoroastrian Tradition: “258 years before Alexander” - so around 628 BCE.
- However, Zarathustra wrote the Gathas.
- Gathas are estimated to have been written in 14th or 13th century BCE since they are written in Gathic Avestan; Zarathustra was born around this time in the Kayanian Dynasty.



# The Origins of the Faravahar



- The Faravahar (Pahlavi) is from Avestan for “I choose”.
- The Faravahar is very similar to the symbol for the Assyrian God Ashur, who predated the Achaemenian Empire.
- Faravahar is a modified symbol of Ashur.

# Who was Ashur?

- King of all Assyrian Gods-country was named after him
- Represented by a sun disk with wings
- Many Assyrian kings were named after him (Ashurnasirpal, Ashur-Uballit I, Ashurbanipal)
- Bow and arrow-modified to represent war



Not a Fravahar-rather, this is the Assyrian god Ashur





An image of Ashur found in the Assyrian Exhibit of the British Museum  
Originally found in the palace of an Assyrian King who reigned in the 800s BCE

# What do the different parts of the Fravahar symbolize?



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