

# PERSIAN MILITARY HISTORY – Ancient Period

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**Overview** Ancient societies were hard won, had many enemies, and inclined to protect themselves along their borders, although rigorous studies hypothesize a state of primitive warlessness, before survival pressures dictated the origins of militarism. Once we encounter states of such high culture, as the great ancient civilizations, we must assume that social existence depends on state of the art military development.

**The Persian setting** The Persian Empire ruled by Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes--the great kings of the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 B.C.E.--stretched from northern Greece to India, and through trade extended tentacles out as far as China and England. Land meant wealth, and tax paying citizens were welcome anywhere--providing they rendered a minimum of loyalty to the Persian state. The Achaemenids, mobilizing the cutting edge of military technology at their time, constantly reinforced their borders with new levels of military power.

**Infantry and their weapons** The grunts bore the heaviest weight of fighting, and were equipped after fashions observed both among the Greeks and among such fierce barbarous neighbors as the Scythians. The little guy wore a tunic that descended below his knees, and that was on occasion reinforced with mail or armor--though the cost of metals was high and such reinforcements were not common. His shield would typically be five feet long, made of withes and wicker woven into an animal skin framework. He would carry a couple of long spears, and arrows, with a cuirass of metal and a helmet. On the whole, we would say, he was lightly and appropriately armed, for his circumstances, which would involve shooting from a distance and not much face to face combat.

**Cavalry** On the battlefield, the infantry ranks would fight in two rows, grunts in the front line, archers behind them at their shoulders, while the cavalry, often charging with chariots, would ride on either side of the infantry, carrying scythes on the protruding axles of their chariots; with deadly results for any enemy forces who found themselves on the wrong side of these blades. The horsemen doing the attacking were skilled at separating enemy infantry from their commanders, thus at breeding chaos and confusion behind enemy lines. The same horsemen typically carried two long spears, deadly even at a distance, and powerful means for keeping the enemy on the defensive.

**The Immortals** This elite battalion of 10,000 men were the shock troops of the Persians, the best and most potently equipped units. Their name was given them by Herodotus, the Greek historian, who noted that in battle no sooner did one of these men fall than he was instantly replaced, guaranteeing the immortality of the whole.

**Mercenaries** Finally it is essential to include the mercenaries, whom the Persians regularly hired to strengthen their forces for large encounters. Scythian archers were regular participants in such actions, as were Ethiopian marines (black) and Iranian nomads, who fought with lassos and battle axes.

## Readings

Lynn, John, *Battle: A Cultural History of Combat and Culture*, New York, 2003.

Archer, I., et. al., *World History of Warfare*, London, 2009.

## Discussion questions

How is it that the Persians, with their massive and well trained military forces, were defeated by the much smaller forces of Athens and other Greek states? Was there, at least in the fifth century B.C.E., some fundamental weakness in the Persian conception of warfare?

How were men conscripted for the Persian army? Was there a universal drafting of age-eligible candidates?

With what kind of fanfare and pomp--with their caravanserais, camp women, specialized foods--did the Immortals go into battle? What role did they play in battle?