

THE PERSIAN WARS

In the 6th century BC, the rising stars on the scene in western Asia were the Persians. As they carved out an empire for themselves, they sparked a series of clashes with the Greek city-states, which lasted for over 50 years.

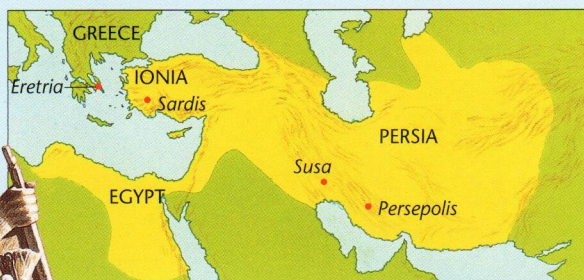
WHO WERE THE PERSIANS?

The Persians were a people from a small kingdom called Persia, at the heart of the country which is now Iran. Their expansion took off in 550BC, when they conquered the nearby kingdom of Media. By 485BC, under Darius I, they had built up a vast empire - one of the largest and most powerful in the ancient world.

Conflict with the Greeks first looked likely in 546BC, when the Persians succeeded in conquering the Greek states in Ionia, on the western coast of Asia Minor, in the area which is now Turkey.



King Darius I



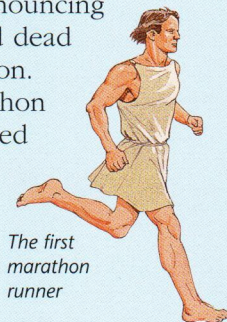
Map of the Persian empire in about 500BC

THE BATTLE OF MARATHON

The Persians never forgave Athens and Eretria for helping the Ionians. In 490BC, King Darius led an invasion against Eretria and crushed it. Then his army landed at Marathon, just northeast of Athens.

The Athenians and their allies marched an army of 10,000 men to meet them. Although the Greeks were heavily outnumbered, they won a tremendous victory, by means of superior tactics and the strength of the hoplite phalanx (see page 179).

A runner was sent to Athens, 25 miles away, with the news. Right after announcing it, he dropped dead from exhaustion. Modern marathon races are named after this.



The first marathon runner

At first, the Greek city-states did little to protest, until 500-499BC, when the Ionians rebelled. This time, they were backed by Athens and Eretria, who provided both men and ships. The Greeks destroyed the Persian city of Sardis, but the revolt collapsed when the Athenians and Eretrians withdrew their support.

Persian relief from the palace at Persepolis, seat of the Persian kings

