



Persians and Greeks

The clash between the Persian Empire and the Greek city-states reshaped the ancient world. Geography influenced how both societies developed, with Persia building a vast empire across Asia and Greece forming smaller city-states around the Mediterranean. Their conflicts sparked decades of war, from the Battle of Marathon to shifting alliances led by Athens and Sparta. These struggles gave rise to new political systems, a golden age of philosophy, and eventually the conquests of Alexander the Great, blending Greek and Persian cultures into the Hellenistic Age.



<p>0:00</p> <p><i>A colorful map with Greek and Persian soldiers moved by a hand. Engravings of assemblies and landscapes slide in. The armies clash with arrows around them.</i></p>	<p>About 2500 years ago, two ancient powers collided. The Persian Empire and the Greek Peninsula. Both powers were shaped by geography that influenced their politics and their culture in very different ways. But they also had something in common. Both the Greeks and the Persians were looking to expand their borders and their influence and that put them on a collision course that would ultimately change history.</p>
<p>0:32</p> <p>A Persian figure walks past mountains, desert, livestock, and harsh terrain. Maps show the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Engravings of grand palaces and busy cities appear, followed by hands exchanging a coin and resource card. A statue of Cyrus the Great is shown, marking the rise of the Persian Empire in 550 BCE.</p>	<p>The early Persians were semi-nomadic pastoralists. They lived and raised sheep and goats on the Iranian plateau, a sprawling region of harsh desert and mountain ranges that ran from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to India's Indus Valley. On either side of the Iranian plateau were cities and wealthy agricultural societies. So, it became an important region where trade routes developed to move goods and resources between the two societies. Eventually Cyrus the Great conquered and united the region establishing the first Persian Empire in 550 BCE.</p>
<p>1:10</p> <p><i>Hands spread across a map. A fist, coins, and livestock appear. Cards labeled taxation, currency, and mail delivery slide in. Dotted lines stretch across the map, which fills with white circles and the number 50 million people.</i></p>	<p>The empire was politically unified under the authority of the emperor, and they gained great power and wealth. They expanded agriculture in the region, controlled trade across it, and implemented central systems for taxation, currency, and mail delivery. The Persian Empire quickly became the largest empire in the world. It extended from Egypt and southern Europe in the west to India in the east and was home to an estimated 50 million people, which may have been around 1/3 of the world's population at the time.</p>
<p>1:45</p> <p><i>A Greek soldier walks through rocky mountains and desert hills. Olives and grapes appear beside a resource card. A ship rows across the sea, followed by a map of the Mediterranean with orange trade routes. Cards labeled Spain, France, Italy, Libya, and Turkey mark Greek colonies, which then change into stone city-state icons.</i></p>	<p>Meanwhile, in the Greek Peninsula, things looked very different. People here were surrounded by islands and steep mountains that limited travel and agriculture. The peninsula's rocky, acidic soil was great for olive trees and vineyards, but not for growing staple crops like wheat. So, the Greeks relied on seafaring and trade, spreading around the Mediterranean Sea to get what they needed. They established Greek colonies all over in what's now Italy, France, Spain, Libya, and Turkey. But rather than establishing a huge, unified empire like the Persians, the Greeks instead formed city-states, independent urban centers that each developed different political systems.</p>
<p>2:31</p> <p><i>Two coins show an owl and a temple. City and Parthenon scenes appear with men in robes and voting stones. Images shift to ruined temples and battles on land and sea.</i></p>	<p>For example, two of the most powerful city-states were Sparta and Athens. Sparta was ruled by kings and advisers, while Athens practiced a version of direct democracy that gave adult male citizens an equal vote in the state's assembly. The Greek city-states were smaller, less politically unified, and less powerful than the Persian Empire. But when conflict began to brew, the Greeks had some advantages of their own.</p>



<p>2:57</p> <p><i>A Greek and Persian soldier face off as “Athens” and dotted lines show the conflict. Resource cards list the Persian army, soldiers march, and an engraving shows a crowded battle. The map returns with Persian troops advancing toward Athens and Sparta..</i></p>	<p>As the Persian Empire expanded, they conquered Greek-speaking city-states in what's now Turkey. In 499 BCE, those city-states rebelled with support from Athens. The rebellion failed, but Persian Emperor Darius I wanted to make the Greeks pay. Persia with its powerful military and vast resources began invading and occupying Greek cities and islands while slowly moving towards Athens. They were used to being able to easily overtake their enemies who often surrendered quickly. And while many city-states did surrender, Sparta and Athens were a different story. Rather than giving in to Persia, Athens fought back.</p>
<p>3:40</p> <p><i>Orange arrows move toward Persia. Cards show the Battle of Marathon and Persia vs Greece. Athens and Sparta link with lines and a handshake. A warship appears, followed by engravings of battles on land and sea, Greek soldiers charging, and ships at sea.</i></p>	<p>They launched an aggressive surprise attack and defeated Persia at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE. Kicking off an almost 50-year period of conflict between Persia and Greece. Then Athens, Sparta, and several other city-states formed an alliance with Sparta holding overall command and Athens leading naval operations. The Persian invasions of Greece advanced over land and sea. The Greek alliance used their ships and geography to their advantage, eventually defeating the Persians.</p>
<p>4:15</p> <p><i>Greek soldiers stand among ruins, with text marking 449 BCE. A painting shows a leader addressing a crowd in Athens, followed by the School of Athens fresco with philosophers debating and writing. Marble busts of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle appear next. A series of maps highlight Athens, Sparta, and Persia, then show the rise of the Macedonian Empire, ending with Alexander the Great on horseback wearing a crown.</i></p>	<p>The Greek victory in 449 BCE. empowered the city-states, especially Athens. They conquered other city-states and built their own empire. And with new confidence in their young democracy, they launched a golden age of scholarship that brought the world philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. But the conflict wasn't over. Without a common enemy, a rivalry between Athens and Sparta weakened the peninsula's political power. Persia took advantage of this fighting to recapture the Greek city-states in Turkey. Then in the 330s BCE, most of the Greek peninsula came under the control of the Macedonian Empire. Its king, Alexander the Great, also went on to conquer the Persian Empire.</p>
<p>5:04</p> <p><i>Hands appear holding a pot and a gem. Cards appear above a quickly changing world map. Screen changes to a colorful map of Greece and Persia with dotted lines circling them. Greek and Persian soldiers appear with black and white stones and mail in-between them.</i></p>	<p>This led to a blending of Persian and Greek culture that became known as the Hellenistic Age and lasted until the rise of the Roman Empire around 30 BCE. While the Persian Empire and Greek city-states were very different societies, their histories were tangled together for more than 200 years. They each developed different ideas and technologies that helped them grow and gain power, but they both cemented legacies that still influence how we think about politics and culture today.</p>