

Darius as king

Once he had seized power, Darius seems to have realised what was needed to control an empire involving three continents, many peoples (who differed in race, culture, language and religion), and huge distances - the largest empire yet seen.

Delegation

Darius delegated regional power to satraps, who had complete authority in twenty satrapies (provinces such as Media, Lydia, Bactria). Sometimes local kings were allowed to continue in power - hence Darius' title as 'King of Kings'.

Records

Meticulous records were kept by scribes, using baked clay tablets, many of which still survive.

Communications: land

Darius organised the building of royal roads, often paved, so that messengers and officials could move across the empire as fast as possible. Herodotus writes:

There is nothing in the world of men that can travel faster than these messengers. It's a Persian invention, and it works like this: they say that horses and riders are on standby for each day of the projected journey, throughout the entire distance to be covered. Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor darkness stop them completing their leg of the journey in the fastest possible time. The first rider hands the message over to a second, the second to a third, and so on.

A message could travel from the capital to the coast - about 2,000 miles - in about a week. Tickets were issued to all official travellers and their animals for free food on their journey.



Communications: sea

Darius' ships could sail from the Mediterranean to India:

King Darius says: I am a Persian. Setting out from Persia, I conquered Egypt. I ordered this canal dug from the river called the Nile that flows in Egypt, to the sea that begins in Persia. When the canal had been dug as I ordered,

Right: Symbol of Ahura Mazda.

Below: daric, showing a crowned figure, running, armed with spear and bow and arrows.



ships went from Egypt through this canal to Persia, just as I intended. [Inscriptions on granite pillars along the Nile.]

Law

Darius fostered the universal rule of law through two principles: **Arta**, 'order based on truth', which the king maintained on behalf of Ahura Mazda; and **Data**, the idea that individual nations could decide their own laws. Thus, for example, the Jews were bound by their own Biblical law code.

Trade and Finance

Darius standardised weights and measures throughout his empire. Taxation was fixed for each satrapy. He initiated a banking system, and created a merchant navy. But the most useful invention was to have a single currency: there was just one gold coin (named a 'daric' after him) which was accepted everywhere, and one silver, the shekel, worth 1/20th of a daric. A daric equated to a soldier's monthly wage.

Religion

Darius seems to have believed that he had been chosen by the god Ahura Mazda to bring justice and stability to the world. Ahura Mazda was the chief god of the Zoroastrian religion, which seems to have originated in eastern Iran.

Questions

1. 'Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness.' Which modern organisation do you think has this as its motto?
2. Discuss Darius' ideas on law. What happens when a conflict exists between 'the truth' and individual nations' laws?
3. What information and impression does a daric convey?
4. How did Darius try to unify his empire and bring different groups of people together?