

Persepolis

Darius' wealth and lifestyle

Darius' empire was huge. He took over two existing cities as his capitals: Ecbatana (modern Hamadan) in the northern mountains (once the main city of the conquered Medes), and Susa in the southern plain (another ancient city, once the capital of the Elamites).

He also started building Parsa, which the Greeks called Persepolis, further east in the heart of Fars, the homeland of the Achaemenids.

The palace

Persepolis symbolised the unprecedented power and almost unimaginable wealth of the Persian Empire – and also the decadent luxury that eventually left it exposed to its enemies.

There was a huge hall with a roof supported by 100 columns, walls covered with painted plaster embedded with jewels, and vast gold-plated doors on stone hinges.

There were gold-lace curtains and rich tapestries, and probably carpets. It could hold 10,000 people. And this was just one of the buildings. Imagine also the Apadana with its gold-covered columns each twenty metres high, surmounted with capitals in the shape of bulls and monsters back to back. Then there was the treasury, holding 120,000 talents of gold; the royal residences of Darius and Xerxes; the harem. Channels for drainage and water supply were cut into the rock foundations before building began. The entire palace was planned out from the beginning, and was roughly rectangular (450 metres x 300 metres).

The administration

How did they run it? How many people worked there? How were they paid and fed? Perhaps surprisingly, we can attempt to answer these questions.

In 331 BC a tower at the north-east corner of Persepolis had collapsed. On 5 March 1933, archaeologists began uncovering

a room in this tower. They were amazed at what they found: thousands upon thousands of baked clay tablets written in cuneiform script. Many had holes so they could be strung together, and most were signed by individuals with their personal seals. Three thousand different seals show that 3,000 different people were involved. Here was a complete archive, revealing minute details of just one aspect of palace administration.

The tablets record what was supplied for those connected with the palace, where it came from and when, and who was responsible. They cover a few years of Darius' reign – a minute fraction of what must have existed.

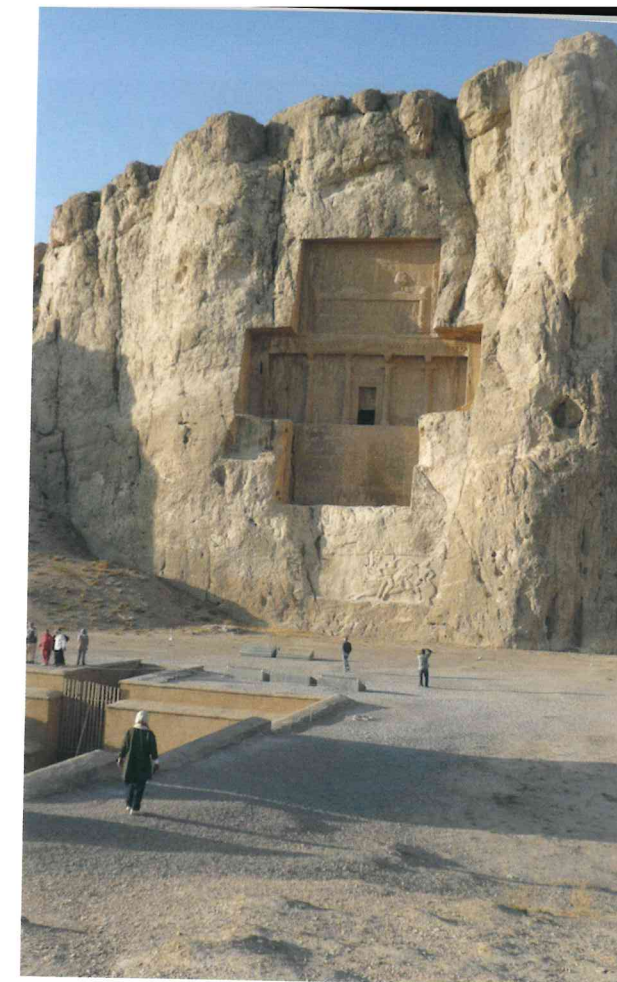
If this one department was so well run, it's not hard to see how the whole empire must have been equally well organised. See what you can work out by looking at an example of one of the tablets:

261½ BAR of grain, supplied by Irtuppiya, Paša, [woman] workers of Liduma [a place], assigned by Iršena ... received as rations for 1 month. Fifth month, 21st year. 16 men 3. 7 boys 2. 5 boys 1½. 6 boys 1. 1 woman 5. 34 women 4. 9 women 3. 1 woman 2. 2 girls 2. 2 girls 1½. 9 girls 1. Total 92 workers.

(A BAR is a measure which equals ten litres of barley. Twenty-first year refers to the year of Darius' reign. Workers were paid in grain, not cash.)

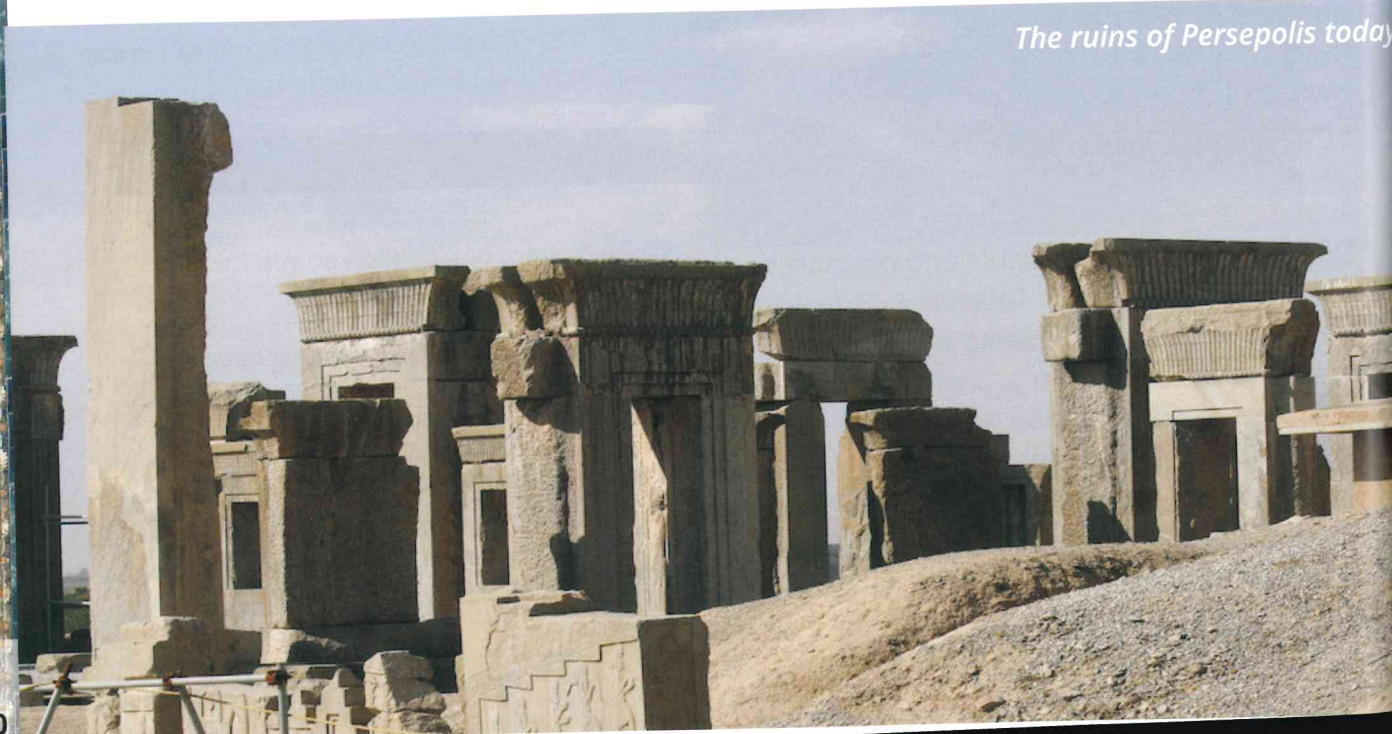
Research

1. Why did Darius need three capitals? (And there was also Babylon and Sardis!)
2. Compare the area of Persepolis with somewhere familiar to you. How many football pitches would fit into it?
3. Find out what happens at Nawruz (the Iranian New Year festival).



Above: Darius' tomb. Darius had this message inscribed: I am a friend to the right. I am not a friend to the wrong. It is not my wish that the weak man should have wrong done to him by the mighty; nor is it my wish that the mighty should suffer at the hands of the weak.

Below: Every year delegates came to Persepolis from every satrapy in the empire, possibly to celebrate New Year. A New Year festival (Nawruz) has been celebrated by Iranians on 21 March since ancient times.



The ruins of Persepolis today

