Darius I (550–486 BC). From 522 to 486 BC, Darius I ruled as king of Persia, an empire centered in what is now Iran. People later called him Darius the Great because he strengthened and expanded the Persian Empire. Darius put down many uprisings and fought several foreign wars. He also organized the empire and ordered many building projects. The Persian Empire was at its largest size when Darius died.
Not much is known about Darius I’s life before he became king. He was born in 550 BC. His father’s name was Hystaspes. Hystaspes was the satrap, or governor, of Parthia, a Persian territory in what is now northeastern Iran. Darius became a commander of the Persian army and fought in Egypt.

In 522 BC the people of Persia revolted against the rule of Cambyses II. A man named Gaumata pretended to be Cambyses’ brother and seized the throne. Seven nobles, including Darius, gathered their forces and killed Gaumata. Darius then seized the throne and became King of Persia.
The seven nobles now had to choose a new government. They discussed various governments including democracy, oligarchy, and monarchy. In the end, they decided that monarchy was the best form of government. In order to choose who would be king, the seven nobles decided to gather at dawn. Each man would arrive riding his horse. The first noble's horse that neighed would be the king of Persia. Darius' horse neighed first and he became king.

During his first years as king Darius had to deal with many revolts, or uprisings of the people. After calming the revolts, Darius started to expand the Persian Empire. He sent armies east to conquer India and west to conquer Europe. Under Darius the empire reached its largest size. He controlled land from Macedonia (northeast of ancient Greece) and Egypt in the west to India in the east.

Darius tried twice to conquer Greece. He failed both times. In 492 BC a storm destroyed Darius' ships. In 490 BC Greeks from Athens beat Darius' forces at the battle of Marathon. Persia and Greece continued to fight for years in the Persian Wars.
Darius was accompanied by his elite guard known as the immortals. The Ten Thousand Immortals were the elite force of the Persian army of the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550-330 BCE). They formed the king’s personal bodyguard and were also considered the shock troops of the infantry in Persian warfare. Their name comes from the policy of always keeping their number at exactly 10,000; if one of their number were killed or could not otherwise fulfill his responsibilities, another was chosen to replace him, thus giving the impression that they could not be killed and so were immortal and invincible.
PROTECTIVE HEADGEAR
According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, who was born in the First Persian Empire, the Immortals wore a hooded felt cap called a stenata that, when pulled over the face, would have protected against dust, wind and dirt. With some sources suggesting a cloth headwear, there is uncertainty over the actual form it took, however.

VARIOUS WEAPONS
Aside from carrying a bow and arrow, the Immortal warriors would also have a large, heavily curved dagger and a short sword, with such an array of weapons making them formidable in battle. The dagger would have been worn at waist level on the right thigh while the shortsword was a kind of light, easily swingable battle-axe with a flat blade and sharp point.

COLOURFUL TUNICS
Underneath the breastplate was a sleeved embroidered tunic decorated in diverse colours. There is also a suggestion that the Immortals also wore an equally colourful outer robe that covered their armours, but some sources say it is unlikely that such a garment would have been worn during combat.

SCALE ARMOUR
In order to protect their bodies, the Immortals wore scale armour breastplates that would have small bronze or iron plates in overlapping rows. Herodotus called them a “coat of mail looking like the scales of a fish.” They were worn with straps slung over the shoulders to keep them firmly in place.

WICKER SHIELD
An oval-shaped shield made of wood and wicker and covered in leather would have provided some protection against the enemy, although it wasn’t very effective against strong spears or throwing stones. During the Immortals’ victory over the Egyptians at the Battle of Pelusium, cats are said to have been painted on the shields, mindful that Egyptians saw harrying these animals as sacrilege.

SHEER FORCE
The Immortals were so-called because they would always be 10,000-strong. Should one die, become sick or injured, they would be replaced to maintain the number. The Immortals were also psychological fighters. Matching uniforms gave the impression they were invincible, while dead and injured warriors were quickly removed from battle to maintain a sense of immortality.

SHORT SPEAR
The spear was the Immortal’s primary weapon and, while six feet in length, they were shorter than their Spartan enemies. At one end was a sharp bronze point. The other end would have a silver or gold counterbalance that, underfoot, helped to denote the warrior’s rank depending on material and shape, could also be used as a weapon.

THE Anatomy of A PERSIAN IMMORTAL WARRIOR
550 BCE – 330 BCE
When the Greeks began to interfere with the lands of Ionia, Darius decided to invade Greece. In what would be known as the First Persian War, Darius led a huge army against the Greeks. However, he was defeated at the Battle of Marathon by the army of Athens.

Besides fighting wars, Darius organized the Persian Empire. He split the empire into districts, which were used to collect taxes and to raise armies. He also made a standard system of money, weights, and measures. He was probably responsible for making Zoroastrianism the official religion. However, he allowed Jews and Egyptians to follow their own religions.

Darius was a strong believer in the religion of Zoroastrianism. He felt that the god Ahura Mazda had appointed him king. Zoroastrianism, the ancient pre-Islamic religion of Iran that survives there in isolated areas and, more prosperously, in India. Zoroastrianism contains both monotheistic and dualistic features. It is arguably the world’s first monotheistic religion. It likely influenced the other major Western religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
Zoroastrianism represents an original attempt at unifying, under the worship of one supreme god, a polytheistic religion comparable to those of the ancient Greeks, Latins, Indians, and other early peoples. Zoroastrianism contains features of “dualism”. Here good and evil fight an unequal battle in which the former is assured of triumph. In this struggle all human beings must enlist because of their capacity for free choice. In other words, one has to choose to follow a good path or an evil path. This is where the concept of Jedi’s came from in Star Wars.

Darius was a great builder. He put buildings along the royal roads where travelers could change horses and rest. He built a canal, or waterway, between the Nile River in Egypt and the Red Sea. The canal made trade much faster and easier.
He built large grain storehouses for the armies. Stored food let the Persians keep much larger armies. Darius also built palaces in the cities of Persepolis and Susa. He made Susa the new capital of the Persian Empire.

He organized his empire by creating twenty provinces and assigning a “governor” to each. The governors ruled in the absence of the king, making important decisions about the land and people they controlled. Most importantly, they collected money in the form of taxes.
To raise funds, Darius registered who owned what land and then imposed taxes accordingly. This meant that the more land you owned the more in taxes you had to pay. This system made things equal across the empire.

He introduced a new monetary unit called the daric. This was accepted throughout the Persian Empire and helped with the trading of goods and services.
In order to help trade and communication, Darius had roads constructed throughout the empire. The most famous road was the Royal Road which stretched nearly 1,700 miles. A system of mounted couriers could enable messages to travel along the entire road in about seven days.
His son Xerxes I returned to conquer Greece ten years later, but he also failed when he was defeated at the Battle of Salamis.