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The Persian (Achaemenid) Invasion of India

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The Persian (Achaemenid) Invasion of India

Practice MCQs

At a glance

This lesson explains how Persia ruled the Indus lands before Alexander.

01 **170** Talents paid by Gandhara and three peoples.
02 **360** Talents of gold dust paid by the Indians.
03 **480 BCE** Indian troops march with Xerxes.
04 **250 BCE** Kharosthi appears in Ashoka edicts.

- Cyrus likely took Gandhara, and Darius I added the Indus valley by 512 BCE.
- Herodotus lists the tax paid by each Persian district.
- The Aramaic script of the Persian office led to Kharosthi.

Source: Livius, Gandara.

Source: Herodotus 3.94, Perseus.

Satrapy A province run by a governor called a satrap.
Talent A unit of weight used to count tribute.
Hindush The Persian name for the lower Indus valley.
Kharosthi An old script of the north-west.

The Persians reached the Indus about 150 years before Alexander. They took Gandhara and the Indus valley, taxed them, and drafted their soldiers. They also left a script behind. This lesson follows that story.

Contents

1. Who took Gandhara
2. Tribute and soldiers
3. What Persia left behind
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Which Persian kings took Gandhara and the Indus?

Cyrus the Great is the likely first conqueror of Gandhara. Darius I added the Indus valley around 515 BCE.

1. Who took Gandhara first?

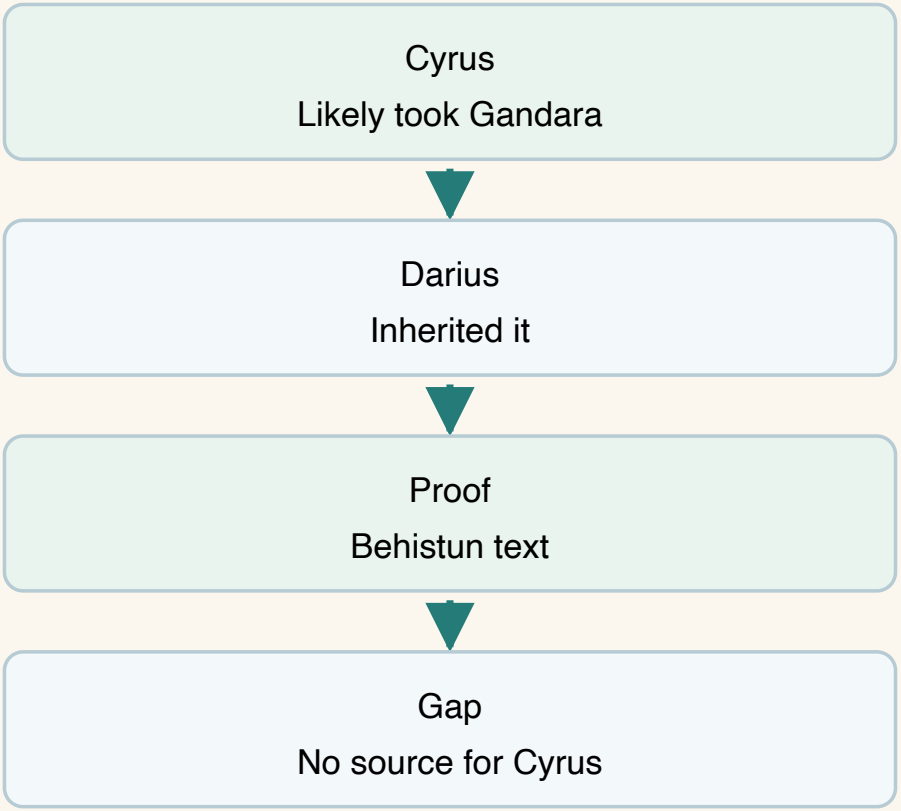
Gandhara was the old name of the Kabul river valley. The Persians called it Gandara. Livius says the Persians invaded it under Cyrus the Great, who ruled from 559 to 530 BCE.

No ancient source describes that conquest. Historians still treat it as certain. Darius I lists Gandara among the lands he inherited. He says so in his Behistun inscription.

So the order is simple. Cyrus won the land. Darius kept it and then pushed on to the Indus.



Indian tribute bearers carved on the Apadana staircase at Persepolis, Iran. Photo by A.Davey, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.



No source describes how Cyrus won Gandara.

True or False: Darius I was the first Persian king to rule Gandhara.
Source: Livius, Gandara, item 1

2. How did Darius reach the Indus?

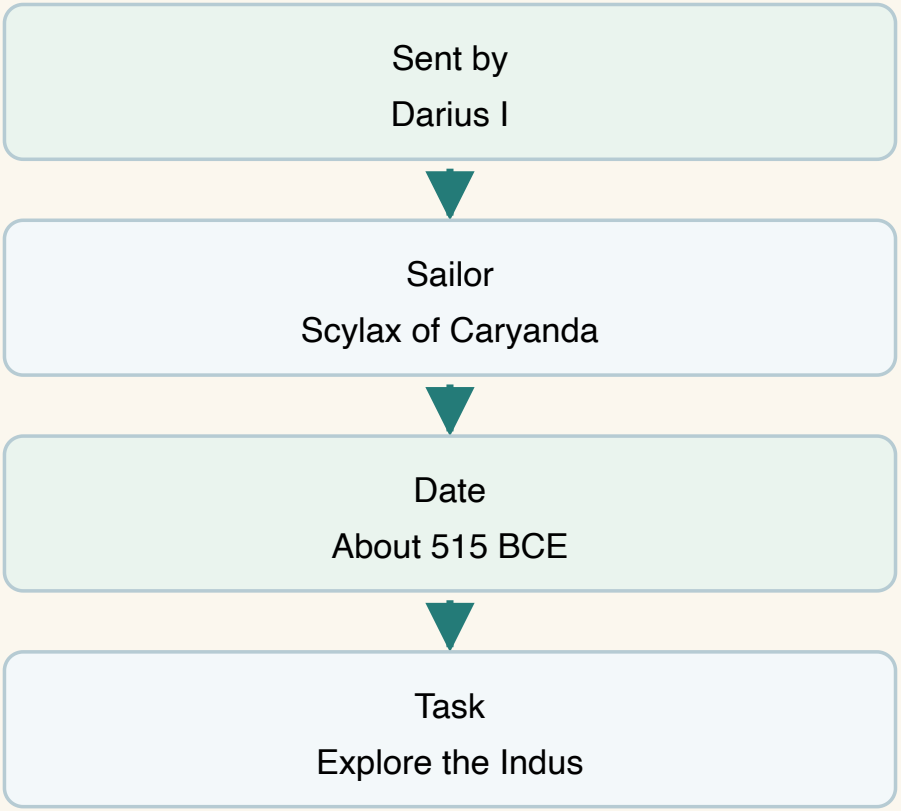
Darius I sent a sea captain named Scylax of Caryanda to explore the Indus. Herodotus says Scylax sailed down the river to the sea. Livius dates that voyage to about 515 BCE.

Herodotus adds that Darius conquered the Indians after the voyage. By 512 BCE India was part of the empire. Livius reasons this from the dates of the Persian lists.

The Persian king probably spent a winter in Gandara. He prepared there for the war in India. Livius says we know little about the campaign itself.



Darius I on the Behistun relief, where Gandara is named. Photographer: Leen van Dorp, via Wikimedia Commons. File page. Licence: CC0.



Herodotus links the voyage to the conquest.

Voyage	India ruled
After 519 BCE	By 512 BCE

The conquest falls between these dates.

True or False: Darius I sent Scylax of Caryanda to explore the Indus.
Source: Livius, Scylax of Caryanda, item 2

Source: Livius, Darius the Great, travels, item 2

3. How much of India did Persia rule?

Persia ruled only the north-west. Its lists name two Indian lands. One is Gandara, the Kabul valley. The other is Hindush, the southern Indus valley.

No list names a land on the Ganges. So this was a frontier conquest, not a conquest of all India.

Livius notes that Gandara controlled the road from the Indus valley to eastern Iran. That made it very valuable to the Persians.

Several passes across the Hindu Kush also lay just north of the Ghorband river. They led on to Bactria. A ruler of Gandara therefore held the gateway between India, Iran and Central Asia.

Livius names one satrap of Gandara in these years. He was Megabazus. He had been fighting in Europe after 513 BCE.

Gandara	Hindush
Kabul valley	Southern Indus
Cophen river	Gold region

Persian lists name only these two.

Source: Livius, Darius the Great, travels, item 3

Source: Livius, Gandara, item 3

What did India pay and send to Persia?

India paid tribute in silver and gold dust, and sent soldiers to the Persian army.

4. What did Gandhara pay?

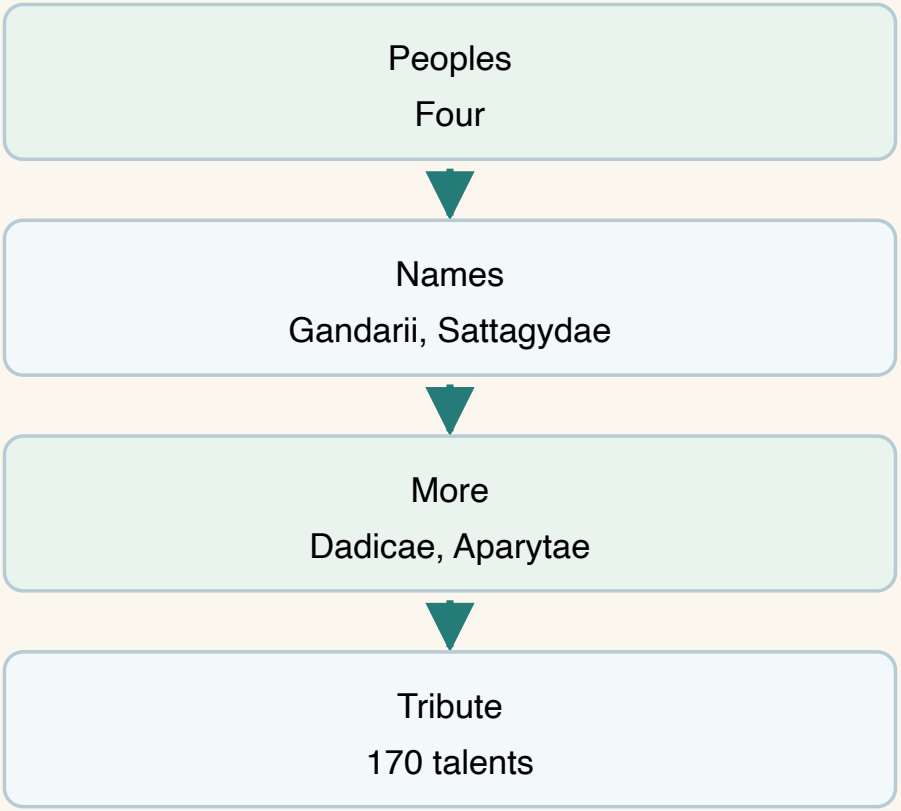
Herodotus lists the tax districts of the Persian empire. Gandhara sat in the seventh district. The district also held the Sattagydians, the Dadicae and the Aparytae.

Together the four peoples paid 170 talents. A talent is a unit of weight used for tribute. So Gandhara paid only a share of the 170 talents.

Livius calls this seventh district the poorest. Do not mix it up with the Indians, who sat in the twentieth district.



Eastern satrapies of the Achaemenid Empire. Map by M.r ebrahim zadeh, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons; cropped to the eastern region.



Four peoples paid 170 talents together.



The Indians alone paid more than twice as much.

True or False: Gandhara alone paid 170 talents in tribute.
Source: Herodotus 3.91, Perseus, item 4

Source: Livius, Gandara, item 4

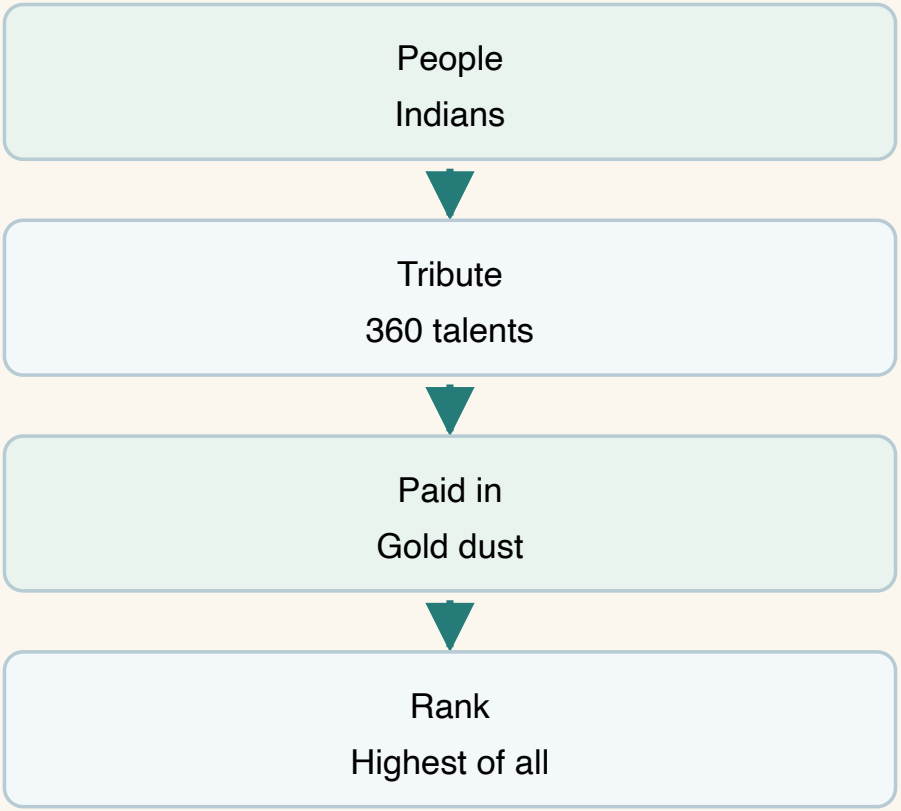
5. What did Hindush pay?

The Indians paid the biggest tribute of any district. They formed the twentieth district. They paid 360 talents of gold dust.

Herodotus says the Indians were more numerous than any nation he knew. Their payment was the greatest of all.

Livius links this to the gold of the Indus. A relief at Persepolis shows a man from Sindhu carrying gold. Livius also says the Persian daric coin began after 515 BCE.

The lists of lands help with dating. The Persepolis terrace list names Indus, the southern Indus valley. Livius says this proves the conquest came before Persepolis was founded. It also came much earlier than the invasion of Europe in 513 BCE.



Hindush paid alone and paid most.

True or False: The Indians paid a greater tribute than any other district.
Source: Herodotus 3.94, Perseus, item 5

Source: Livius, Darius the Great, travels, item 5

6. Did Indians fight for Persia?

Yes. Indian soldiers marched with Xerxes when he invaded Greece in 480 BCE. Herodotus describes them in his list of the army.

The Indians wore cotton clothes. He calls it tree-wool. They carried reed bows and iron-tipped reed arrows. Their commander was Pharnazathres.

Gandarian and Dadican troops marched too. They shared one commander named Artyphius. They had the same gear as the Bactrians.

Gandara gave goods as well as soldiers. Livius says yaka-wood from Gandara and Carmania was carried to Susa. It was used in a new palace there.



Herodotus describes the Indian troops.

True or False: Indian soldiers marched with Xerxes in 480 BCE.
Source: Herodotus 7.65, Perseus, item 6

Source: Herodotus 7.66, Perseus, item 6

What did Persian rule leave behind in India?

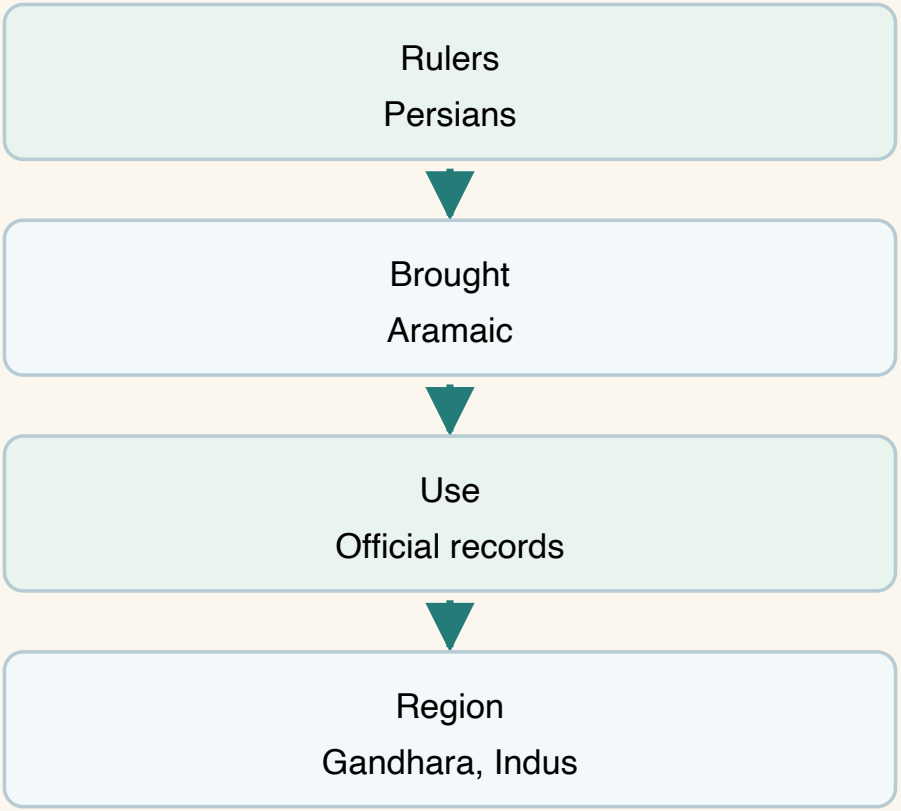
Persian rule left a script. Aramaic came to Gandhara, and Kharosthi grew from it.

7. How did Aramaic reach Gandhara?

The Persians used Aramaic for official records. Aramaic was written in a north Semitic script.

World History says the Persians took control of Gandhara and the Indus between the late 6th and early 5th century BCE. They brought Aramaic with them.

Clerks used it for tax and orders across the empire. Scribes in Gandhara met it as part of daily government work.



Aramaic was the script of the Persian office.

Source: World History, Kharosthi Script, item 7

Source: Glass, Kharosthi manuscripts, item 7

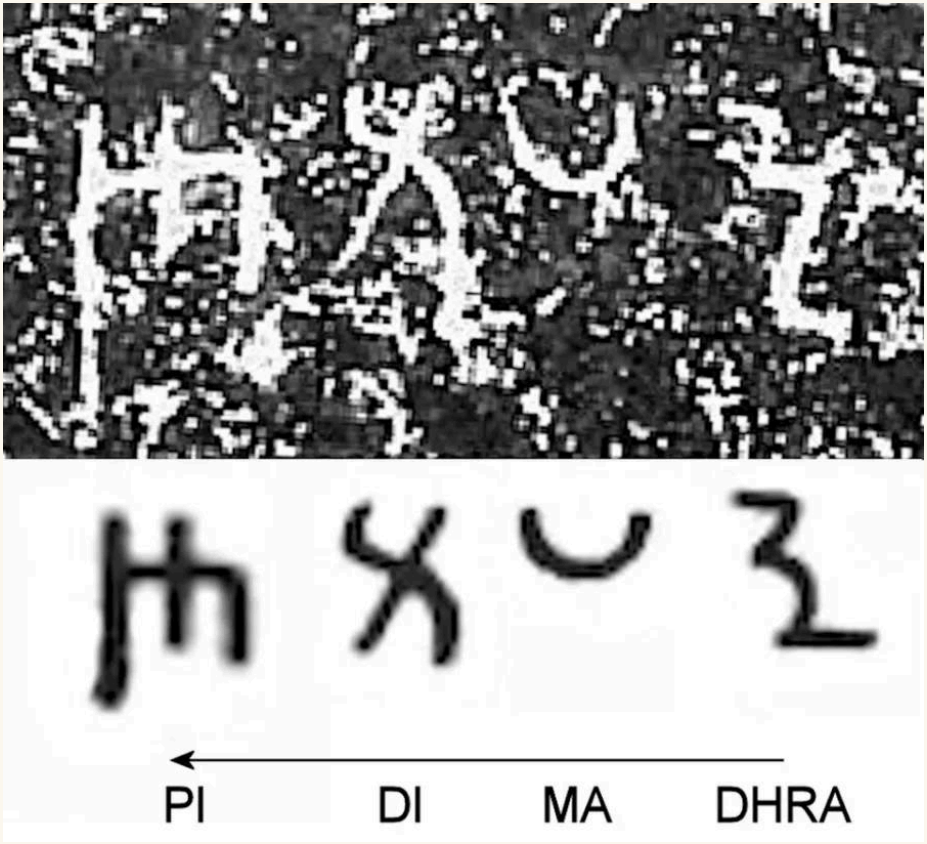
8. What is Kharosthi, and where is it first seen?

Kharosthi is a script for Gandhari. Gandhari was a Prakrit spoken in Gandhara. The script adapts the north Semitic letters used for Aramaic.

Andrew Glass says it is almost certainly related to Aramaic. It probably grew while Aramaic was the office script of the region.

Its oldest clear examples are Ashoka’s edicts at Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi, dated to about 250 BCE. Those two sites are in northern Pakistan.

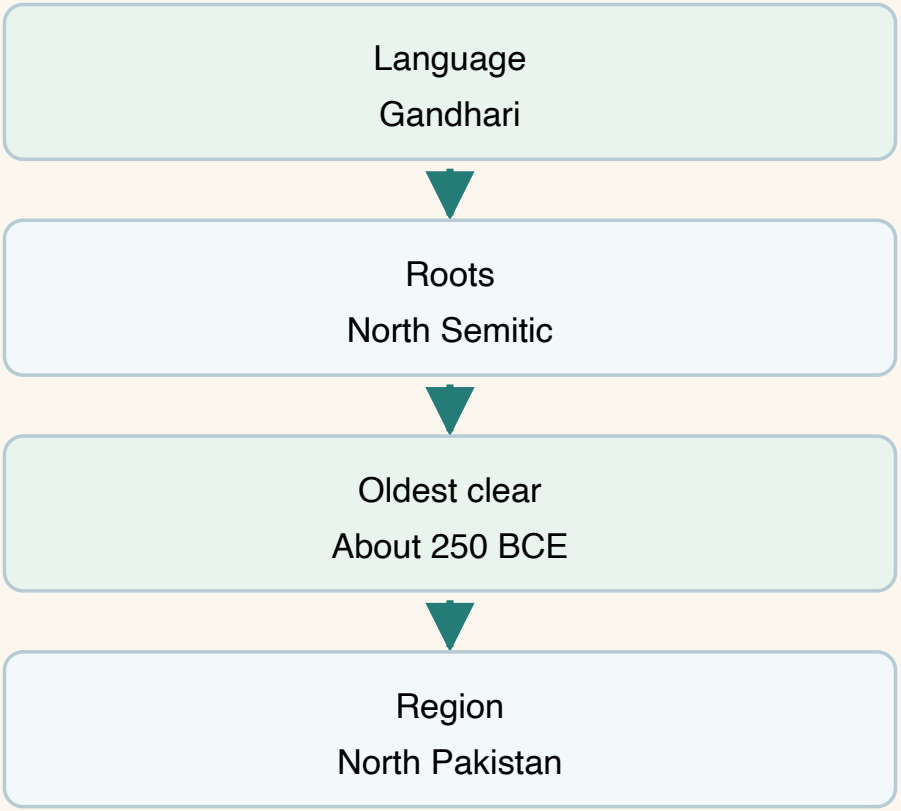
Other Ashokan edicts nearby used Aramaic at Lampaka and Greek at Taxila. In the rest of India, Ashoka’s edicts used Brahmi.



Ashoka's First Edict at Shahbazgarhi, written in the Kharosthi script. Plate by Eugen Hultzsch, 1925, via Wikimedia Commons. File page.

Kharosthi	Others
Mansehra	Aramaic: Lampaka
Shahbazgarhi	Greek: Taxila

Three scripts were used in the north-west.



Kharosthi grew from the Aramaic script.

True or False: Ashoka's edict at Lampaka was written in Kharosthi.
Source: World History, Kharosthi Script, item 8

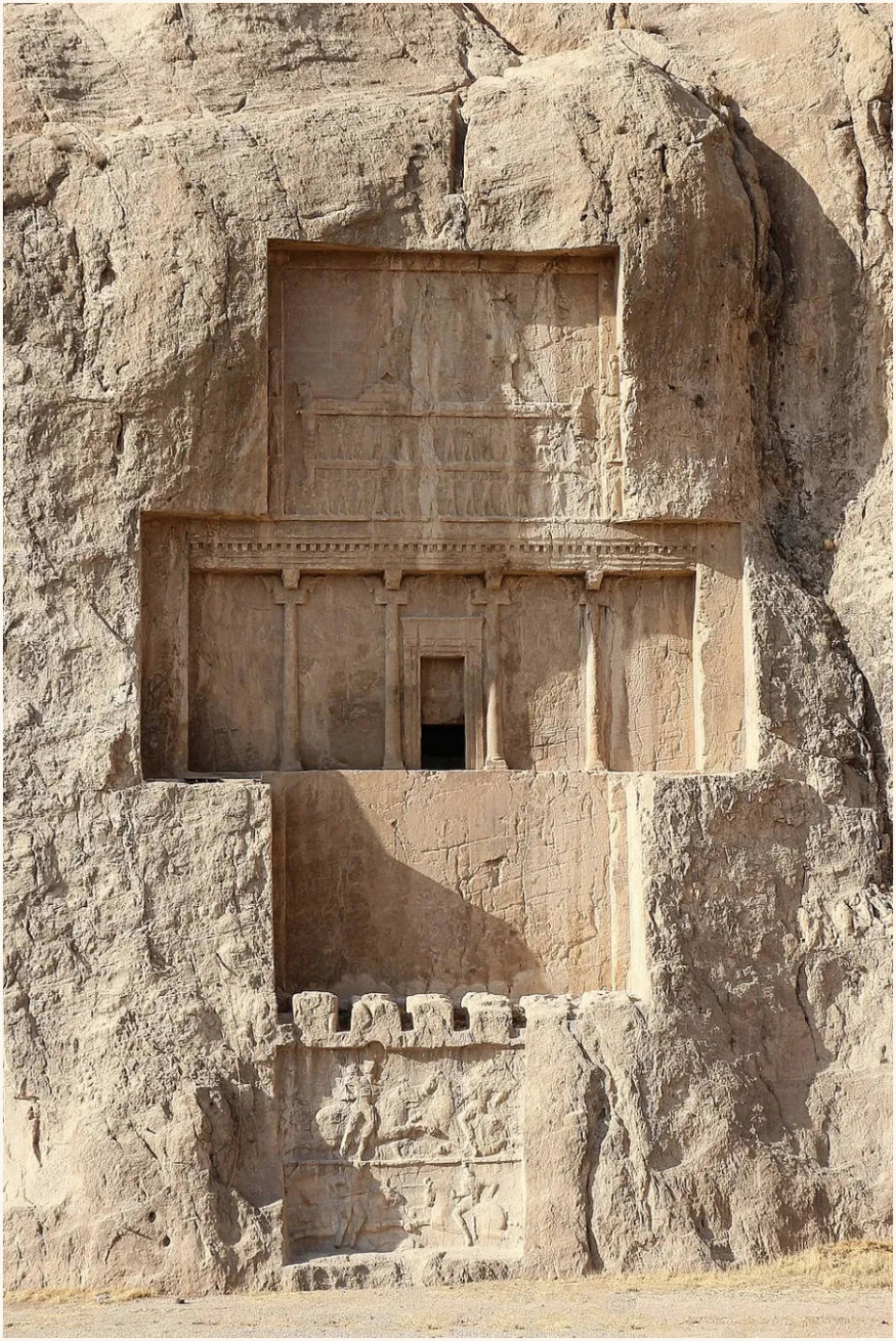
Source: Glass, Kharosthi manuscripts, item 8

9. Where do Persian kings name India in stone?

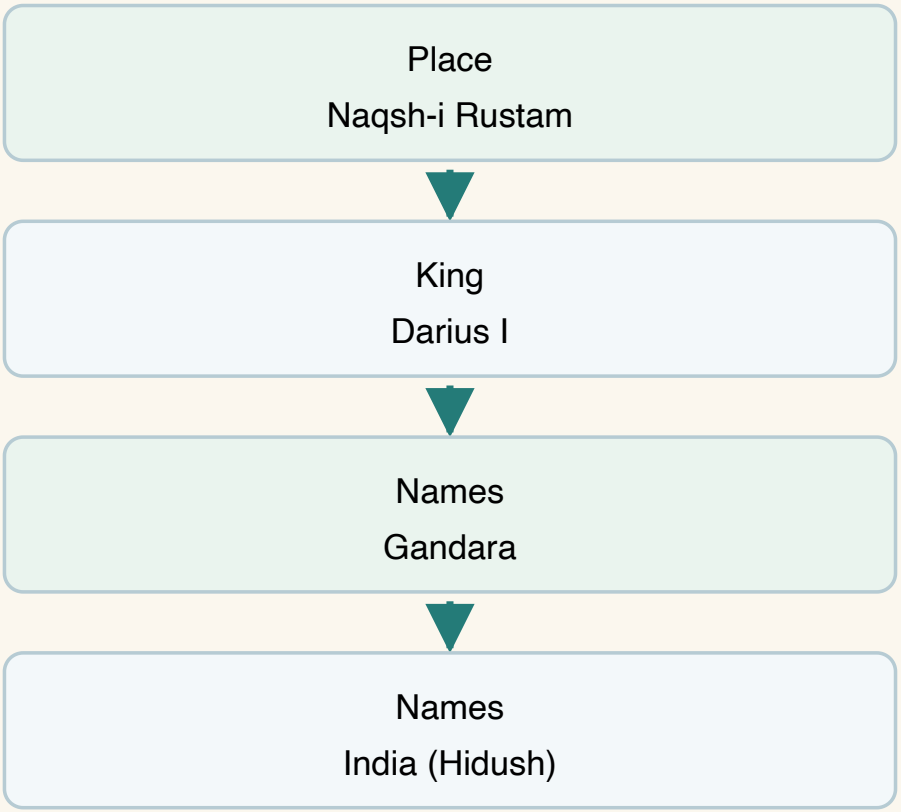
Darius I names Gandara and India in his tomb inscription. The tomb is at Naqsh-i Rustam in Iran.

The text is called DNa. In it Darius lists the lands he took outside Persia. Both Gandara and India appear on the list. The Old Persian form for India is Hidush.

The Behistun inscription also names Gandara. Its list runs to twenty-three lands in all. So Darius counted these lands as his own from early in his reign.



The tomb of Darius I at Naqsh-i Rustam, Iran. Photographer: Bernard Gagnon, via Wikimedia Commons. File page. Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0.



Darius lists both lands on his tomb.

True or False: Darius's tomb inscription names both Gandara and India.
Source: Livius, DNa inscription, item 9

Source: Livius, Gandara, item 9

What should I remember for exams?

Remember three pairs: Cyrus and Darius, Gandhara and Hindush, Aramaic and Kharosthi.

10. What is the quick comparison?

- **Cyrus:** likely took Gandhara. No source describes it.
- **Darius I:** inherited Gandara, then took the Indus valley by 512 BCE.
- **Gandhara:** seventh district. 170 talents shared by four peoples.
- **Hindush:** twentieth district. 360 talents of gold dust.
- **Xerxes, 480 BCE:** Indian soldiers in cotton, with reed bows.
- **Kharosthi:** grew from Aramaic. First clear in Ashoka's edicts.

Watch for one trap. The 170 talents were paid by four peoples together. The 360 talents were paid by the Indians alone.

170 talents Four peoples Seventh district	360 talents Indians alone Twentieth district

The trap is who paid.

Source: Herodotus 3.91, Perseus, item 10

Source: Herodotus 3.94, Perseus, item 10

Source: World History, Kharosthi Script, item 10

Four questions to think through

Why did the Indians pay so much tribute?

They paid in gold dust. Livius links this to the gold of the Indus region. Herodotus says they were more numerous than any nation he knew. So the district gave the largest payment.

Why is Cyrus's conquest of Gandhara uncertain?

No ancient source describes it. Historians infer it from Darius. His Behistun inscription lists Gandara as an inherited land. So Persia held it before Darius took the throne.

Why did the north-west use a different script?

Aramaic was the office script under the Persians. Scribes in Gandhara adapted its letters for Gandhari. The result was Kharosthi. Brahmi was used for Ashoka's edicts in the rest of India.

How do I avoid mixing up 170 and 360?

Ask who paid. Four peoples shared the 170 talents. The Indians alone paid the 360. Link seven with shared and twenty with gold.

Check your understanding

Your 7 quick checks Answered 0 of · Correct
This score resets when the page reloads.

Continue to the practice MCQs

Test Yourself

Try practice questions on the Persian invasion of India.

Practice MCQs

1. According to Herodotus, Gandhara belonged to the Achaemenid Empire's 7th tax district. How much tribute did that district pay?

A. 1,000 talents of silver

B. 360 talents of gold dust

C. No tribute at all, as a client state

D. 170 talents, shared with three neighbouring peoples

See answer ↓

2. In Herodotus's list of tax districts, which district paid 360 talents of gold dust?

A. Susa and the Cissian country, in the eighth district

B. The Moschi and their neighbours, in the nineteenth district

C. The Indians, in the twentieth district

D. Gandhara and its neighbours, in the seventh district

See answer ↓

3. Darius I names Gandara and India among his lands in a tomb inscription. At which site is the tomb?

A. Naqsh-i Rustam

B. Behistun

C. Persepolis

D. Susa

See answer ↓

4. Ashoka's edicts at Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi were written in which script?

A. Kharosthi

B. Brahmi

C. Greek

D. Aramaic

See answer ↓

5. At which site did Ashoka's edicts appear in the Aramaic script?

A. Lampaka

B. Mansehra

C. Shahbazgarhi

D. Taxila

See answer ↓

6. Indian troops marched with Xerxes into Greece in which year?

A. 250 BCE

B. 480 BCE

C. 326 BCE

D. 515 BCE

See answer ↓

7. Which sea captain did Darius I send to explore the Indus?

A. Pharnazathres

B. Artyphius

C. Scylax of Caryanda

D. Megabazus

See answer ↓

8. Which Persian king is thought to have first conquered Gandhara?

A. Darius I

B. Cyrus the Great

C. Xerxes

D. Artaxerxes

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The answer is 170 talents, shared with three neighbouring peoples. Herodotus puts Gandhara in the seventh tax district. The Sattagydians, Dadicae and Aparytae paid with it. The figure of 360 talents of gold dust belongs to the Indians alone. A district that paid nothing is not in his list. Memory hook: seven is shared, twenty is rich. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The Indians are the answer. They formed the twentieth district. They paid 360 talents of gold dust, the most of any district. The seventh district, with Gandhara, paid only 170 talents. Susa and the Cissian country paid 300 talents. The nineteenth district also paid 300. Memory hook: twenty is gold. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** Naqsh-i Rustam is the answer. Darius the Great is buried there. His inscription DNa lists the lands he took outside Persia. Gandara and India both appear in that list. Persepolis and Susa have other royal buildings. Behistun holds a different inscription. Memory hook: the tomb text is DNa. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** Kharosthi is the answer. These two sites are in northern Pakistan. The edicts there date to about 250 BCE. Brahmi was used for Ashoka's edicts in the rest of India. Greek was used at Taxila. Aramaic was used at Lampaka. Memory hook: the north-west used Kharosthi. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** Lampaka is the answer. Aramaic was the office script of the Persian empire. Ashoka's edicts at Taxila were in Greek. Those at Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi were in Kharosthi. Memory hook: Lampaka kept the old Persian script. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** The answer is 480 BCE. Herodotus lists Indian soldiers in the army of Xerxes. They wore cotton and carried reed bows. Their commander was Pharnazathres. The year 515 BCE is about when Darius took the Indus valley. The year 250 BCE is the date of Ashoka's north-west edicts. Memory hook: Xerxes marched in 480. ↑ Q6
7. **C.** Scylax of Caryanda is the answer. Herodotus says he sailed down the Indus for Darius. Livius dates the voyage to about 515 BCE. Pharnazathres led the Indian troops under Xerxes. Artyphius led the Gandarians and Dadicae. Megabazus was a satrap of Gandara. Memory hook: Scylax is the sailor. ↑ Q7
8. **B.** Cyrus the Great is the likely answer. Livius dates the Persian invasion of Gandara to his reign. No ancient source describes it. Darius lists Gandara as a land he inherited. So Darius I kept it and added the Indus valley. Memory hook: Cyrus won it, Darius kept it. ↑ Q8

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