

# CYRUS THE GREAT AND THE CREATION OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

The Persian king, Cyrus the Great, created the largest empire the world had ever seen in his time. He then devised a new way of governing conquered peoples.

## Ancient History: Telling Fact from Fiction

Historians think Cyrus the Great was born sometime around 580 B.C. and died in 530 B.C. What happened in the years between is not entirely clear. Some of the sources of information about him, going back more than 2,500 years, are contradictory, biased, and based more on fiction than fact.

The ancient Persians themselves never wrote their own history. However, references to Cyrus exist on stone and clay inscriptions. In addition, there are Babylonian records, a mention of him in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), and stories about his life recorded by Greek writers who believed the Persians, like all non-Greeks, were “barbarians.”

The Greek writer Herodotus, known as the “Father of History,” wrote *The Histories*, which describes what he learned during his extensive travels. He interviewed knowledgeable people, collected their stories, and chose to write about the versions he thought most believable. He followed this method when he wrote about Cyrus 90 years after his death. Modern historians tend to accept much of what Herodotus wrote about Cyrus, but sometimes question his stories with a moral attached to them.

Another Greek, Xenophon (pronounced *zeno-fon*), wrote his *Cyropaedia* (*Education of Cyrus*) 70 years after Herodotus wrote his *Histories*. Xenophon had more direct contact with the Persians than Herodotus. Xenophon’s writings also tend to portray Cyrus as an ideal monarch, as he intended to teach his fellow Greeks about the qualities of good rulers. Historians today consider Xenophon’s work a mix of fact and fiction.

## The Young Cyrus

In *The Histories*, Herodotus told a widely believed story of Cyrus’s birth and early life. The story makes Cyrus’s birth and childhood seem like a myth. The story begins when King Astyages of Media married off a daughter to the Persian king of neighboring Anshan, Cambyses I. Shortly after news that his daughter was pregnant, Astyages had a dream that she would give birth to a boy who would someday overthrow him.

Astyages believed his dream was a prophecy, or vision of the future. Fearing for his throne, Astyages ordered one of his army generals, Harpagus, to kill his newborn grandson,



(Slamax/Wikimedia Commons)(CC BY-SA 3.0)

Cyrus II of Persia (aka Cyrus the Great) as depicted on a monument at Sydney Olympic Park, Australia.

Cyrus. Harpagus, however, disobeyed and secretly handed over the infant to a poor shepherd and his wife.

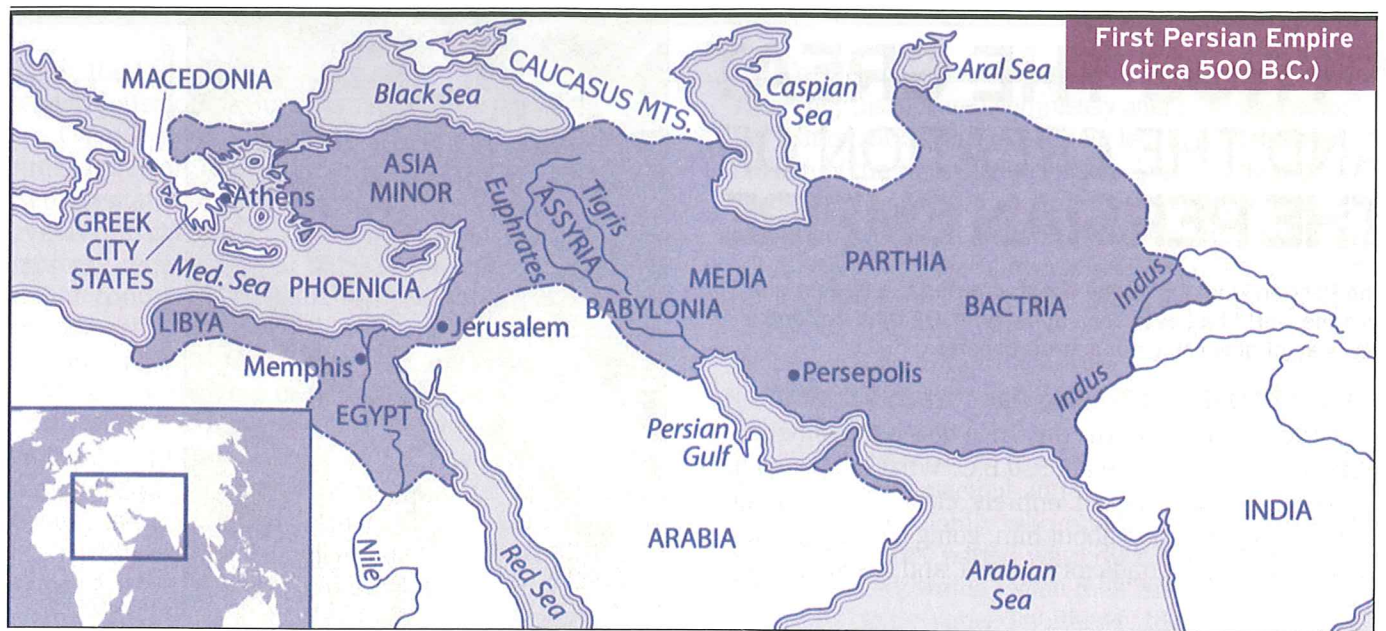
About ten years later, King Astyages learned Cyrus was alive. The king had always felt guilty about ordering the death of his grandson, so he rejoiced and sent the young Cyrus back to his true parents in Anshan. But Astyages was angry at Harpagus because he had lied to him about killing Cyrus. As Herodotus tells it, Astyages deceived Harpagus into eating a stew at a banquet made with the remains of Harpagus’s son whom the king had killed.

According to Xenophon, Cyrus at the Persian royal court of his father grew to be a handsome prince admired by all. Xenophon wrote that Cyrus was trained to be a tough warrior. Herodotus, however, described a soft life in the Persian royal court.

In his *Education of Cyrus*, Xenophon included a conversation in which King Cambyses I passed on advice to his teenage son on how to be a successful general and ruler. Since Xenophon was not a witness to such a conversation nor had any record of it, he made it up. Nevertheless, the essence of what Cambyses purportedly advised Cyrus seems to foreshadow what kind of king he actually became.

Cyrus asked his father what was the best way to gain an advantage over the enemy. Cambyses replied, “The man who proposes to do that must be designing and cunning, wily and deceitful, a thief and a robber, overreaching the enemy at every point.”

Cyrus next asked how to secure the love of his subjects. Cambyses said he should show his subjects that “you are eager to help them in times of distress” and in all times “go hand in hand with them.”



### Cyrus "King of Kings"

Cyrus became King of Anshan after his father died in 559 B.C. Like his father, Cyrus owed allegiance to Astyages, the king of Media and his grandfather. But Cyrus had become restless, ambitious, and unwilling to continue paying him annual tribute (gold, valuable goods, soldiers).

According to the story told by Herodotus, Harpagus was "burning for revenge" for the murder of his son by King Astyages and the gruesome banquet that followed. Harpagus plotted with Cyrus to overthrow King Astyages by promising to turn his soldiers to Cyrus's side when he attacked Media.

The plot worked, and Cyrus, at about age 30, defeated his grandfather in 550 B.C. Cyrus then took the throne of Media, neatly fulfilling Herodotus's account of Astyages's dream. Cyrus did not order his death, but sent him to rule a remote province. Cyrus then married another daughter of his grandfather (his aunt!). Thus, Cyrus united the Persians and Medes into one kingdom. He took the title, "King of Kings."

The kingdom of Lydia controlled a large area that included numerous city-states in what is now Turkey. The Lydian king, Croesus (pronounced *kree-sus*), was shocked by Cyrus's conquest of Media. Worried about his own security, Croesus mounted an attack on Media to crush Cyrus. According to Herodotus, Croesus was confident because he had received a prophecy from a famous Greek oracle: "If Croesus attacked the Persians, he would destroy a great empire."

After several battles, Cyrus finally defeated King Croesus around 445 B.C. In addition, Cyrus captured Lydia's city-states. Thus, Croesus discovered that the "great empire" he would destroy was his own! According to Herodotus, Cyrus made King Croesus his "wise advisor."

Leaving a small garrison of soldiers in Lydia, Cyrus soon continued his quest for conquest and led most of

his army eastward into Central Asia. But shortly after he left for the east, Lydian and Ionian city-states revolted.

Cyrus sent a part of his army back to Lydia to reconquer and punish the rebels. Cyrus could be generous to the people he conquered, but treated them harshly if they were disloyal or revolted.

At about age 40, Cyrus returned from fighting in Central Asia to attack his greatest opponent yet: the Babylonian Empire. This was the latest of a series of civilizations reaching far back to Sumer and Akkad in what is now Iraq.

The Babylonians had maintained a long tradition of cuneiform writing on clay tablets, the world's oldest writing system. Unlike the Persians, the Babylonians kept a record of their history. This practice continued when Cyrus invaded Babylon.

In 539 B.C., Cyrus won a major battle against the Babylonian king, Nabonides. He then retreated to his capital, Babylon, on the Euphrates River that ran through the city. Herodotus says Cyrus diverted the Euphrates, which enabled his soldiers to walk on the riverbed into Babylon. In any case, Babylonian records agree Cyrus captured Babylon and King Nabonides without bloodshed. Cyrus spared the conquered king and sent Nabonides into exile.

Cyrus quickly took command of the Babylonian Empire's territories and received tribute from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea and borders of Egypt. In less than 20 years, he had expanded the Persian Anshan kingdom to the largest empire the world had ever seen.

### Cyrus "King of the World"

According to Babylonian accounts, Cyrus ordered his men not to loot and burn Babylon. He then ordered the temples of the traditional Babylonian gods, especially Marduk, rebuilt. They had been neglected by Nabonides who had tried to replace Marduk with another god. A

Babylonian cuneiform tablet recorded that the people “All rejoice to look upon him as king.”

In 1879, British Museum archaeologists, digging in the ruins of Babylon, discovered a remarkable object known as the “Cyrus Cylinder.” This is a clay barrel-shaped object about ten inches long and four inches wide covered with cuneiform writing dictated by Cyrus himself. When translated, the Cyrus Cylinder revealed the Persian king’s version of his conquest and early rule of Babylonia.

The Cyrus Cylinder made a strong case for Cyrus’s legitimacy as the new king of Babylonia. Cyrus said Marduk chose him to replace the shameful King Nabonides, and made possible the Persian king’s victories over the Medes and other enemies. Pleased that Cyrus ruled “in justice and righteousness,” Marduk “walked at his side” to Babylon and enabled him to enter the city “without bloodshed and save the people.”

The language of the Cylinder then shifted to first person as Cyrus addressed the Babylonians directly: “I am Cyrus, king of the world, the great king, the powerful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the world.” Cyrus then listed the blessings he had brought to the people.

In probably the most remarkable part of the Cylinder, Cyrus stated that he freed foreign peoples taken to Babylonia as slaves. “I collected together all of their people,” he declared, “and returned them to their settlements.”

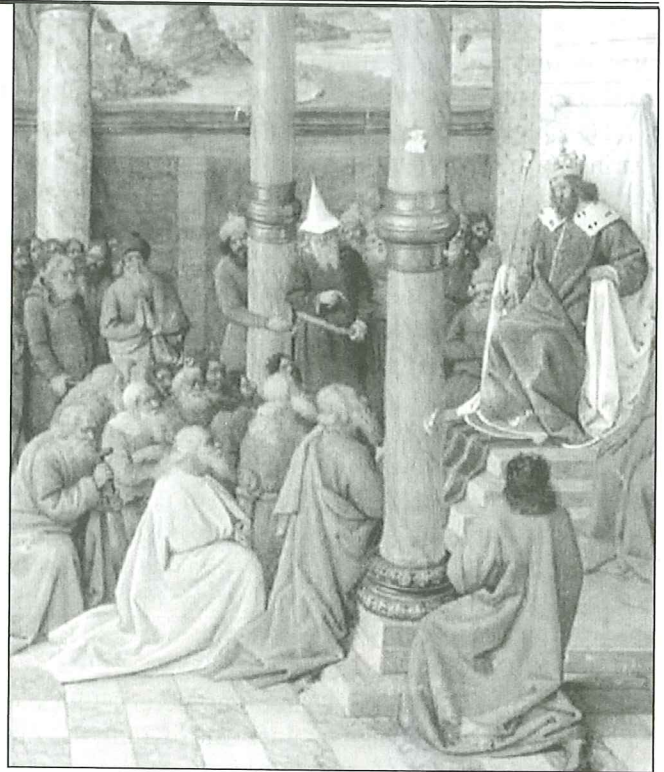
Cyrus did not specifically mention the group of Jews the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II had taken as slaves back to Babylon about 60 years earlier. But the Jewish community was also freed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. This was confirmed in the Old Testament of the Bible (Ezra 1:1-2).

The modern concept of “human rights” did not exist in Cyrus’s time. But Cyrus’s liberation of captive peoples and allowing them to continue practicing their religion seems modern. He did seem to recognize that fairly treating peoples he conquered made it easier for him to rule them.

### “Cyrus the Great”

For the next several years, Cyrus organized his empire. He began to construct a new Persian capital, Pasargadae. He also established policies that permitted the peoples he conquered to continue practicing their local traditions, customs, laws, and religions.

Cyrus was never considered a god like the Egyptian pharaohs, but he did possess absolute power. Still, he appointed Persian relatives and nobles as regional governors, called satraps.



This 15th century painting by Jean Fouquet depicts Cyrus the Great permitting the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem.

*Cyrus’s liberation of captive peoples and allowing them to continue practicing their religion seems modern.*

Below the satraps, Cyrus put the administration of most government matters in the hands of local people, thus strengthening their loyalty to him. Government business was carried out in the local language, not Persian. He did not confiscate the land, but left most of it in the hands of the original owners. Perhaps most important to the people, Cyrus permitted them to continue worshipping their traditional gods. These examples of self-government plus respect for other religions were rare for this time.

Babylonian and other ancient sources agree that Cyrus’s policies were generally followed throughout the empire. For this reason as well as his conquests, Persians call him to this day “Cyrus the Great.”

### The Death of Cyrus

Herodotus wrote that in 530 B.C. Cyrus led a new military campaign east of the Aral Sea against the Massagetae people and their Queen Tomyris. When Cyrus approached her army, she asked him to turn back and “be king over thine own people, and endure to see us ruling those whom we rule.” But Cyrus had no intention of backing away from another conquest.

According to Herodotus, Cyrus abandoned his camp, but left it well stocked with food and wine. The Massagetae warriors entered the camp without a fight and promptly feasted and got drunk. Cyrus’s warriors then ▶

attacked and slaughtered them except for a few they captured, including Queen Tomyris's son.

The Queen, however, had held back her main force. Fearing for her son's life, she did not attack right away but sent a message to Cyrus, calling for him to release her son. According to Herodotus, if Cyrus refused, the Queen warned, "I will give thee thy fill of blood, blood-thirsty as thou art." Cyrus ignored the warning.

The Queen's son, shamed at being captured while drunk, took his own life. When she learned of this, Queen Tomyris blamed Cyrus. This resulted in several battles that ended with the Persians defeated and Cyrus dead.

Herodotus wrote that Queen Tomyris had Cyrus's head cut off and put in a skin bag full of Persian blood. She proclaimed, "You have ruined me by . . . taking my son. See now — I fulfil my threat; you have your fill of blood." Somehow, Cyrus's son and successor king, Cambyses II, retrieved Cyrus's body and took it back to Pasargadae to be buried in a tomb.

Xenophon, writing 70 years after Herodotus, said nothing about a campaign against Queen Tomyris. According to Xenophon, Cyrus in old age at Pasargadae summoned his two sons, Cambyses II and Tanaoxares, along with friends and others.

From his deathbed, Cyrus declared Cambyses, his older son, to be his successor as king, then made Tanaoxares satrap of Media and other lands. According to Xenophon, Cyrus implored his sons to honor one another:

Your deeds will be [seen] in all the eyes of mankind, and if they be righteous deeds . . . they will blazon forth your power; but if you [plot] evil against one another, you will forfeit the confidence of every man. . . Therefore,

if my words are strong enough to teach you your duty to one another, it is well. But if not, let history teach you, and there is no better teacher.

Then, Xenophon wrote, Cyrus grasped the hands of all present, covered his face, and died.

Cambyses II went on to conquer Egypt and part of North Africa. He and his brother, however, became enemies. One story even had Cambyses ordering the killing of Tanaoxares. Nonetheless, the Persian Empire continued to flourish for another 200 years until conquered by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C.

## WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. Why do today's historians sometimes have difficulty writing about ancient history? Use examples from the article.
2. What moral may Herodotus have been hinting at in the way he described the end of Cyrus's life? Compare it to the way Xenophon described the end of Cyrus's life.
3. Cambyses advised young Cyrus to "go hand in hand" with his subjects in order to be loved by them. Do you think Cyrus followed this advice as king and emperor? Why or why not? Use examples from the article.
4. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams all had Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* in their personal libraries and admired Cyrus the Great. They did not yet know about the Cyrus Cylinder. Recall the American Revolution and the U.S. Constitution. What actions of the Cyrus described in the *Cyropaedia*, both as a young man and as a king, would have made the Founding Fathers admire him so much? Use examples from the article.

## ACTIVITY: Cyrus the Great?

In the *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon judged Cyrus to be a great man. Xenophon wrote:

*And even to this day the barbarians tell in story and in song that Cyrus was most handsome in person, most generous of heart, most devoted to learning, and most ambitious, so that he endured all sorts of labor and faced all sorts of danger for the sake of praise.*  
Xenophon, *Education of Cyrus*

1. All students should closely read Xenophon's quote. As a whole class, discuss how Xenophon describes Cyrus.
2. Students should form small groups of four or five and reread the article, looking for examples that support each of Xenophon's claims about Cyrus's greatness. Are there also examples that do *not* support any of Xenophon's claims? Are any of Xenophon's claims not supported by *any* evidence?
3. Then, each group should discuss the guiding question: **Was Cyrus great?** Each group should try to reach consensus, either for a *yes* or *no* answer, with at least three reasons to support the group's decision.
4. Each group will share their group's decision and supporting reasons.
5. Finally, each student can form his or her own opinion regardless of the group's decision and write one well-developed paragraph answering the guiding question above, using examples from the article and from discussion.

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