



CYROPAEDIA

CYROPAEDIA (Gr. *Kúrou paideía*, The education of Cyrus), a partly fictional biography of [Cyrus the Great](#) (559-29 b.c.e.), founder of the Achaemenid empire. It is the longest work written by the Athenian gentleman, soldier, and writer Xenophon (b. ca. 430-25 b.c.e., d. after 356), who served in the expedition of [Cyrus the Younger](#) against his brother Artaxerxes II (405-359 b.c.e.) in 401. The title is strictly applicable only to the first of the eight books into which the work is divided. In that book Cyrus' descent, the Persian educational system, and his stay at the court of his maternal grandfather, the Median king [Astyages](#), are sketched.

Six of the remaining books are devoted to Cyrus' conquests and his organization of the empire while still technically a vassal of the Median king. In book 2 Cyrus' reorganization of his army is described, in book 3 the conquest of Armenia and Scythia, and in books 4-6 the wars against Assyria. These accounts of military matters are enlivened by stories apparently borrowed from eastern narrative traditions, for example, the story of Gobryas and his feud with the Assyrian king (4.6.2-7) and the famous romance of Panthea and Abradatas (4.6.11, 5.1.1-18, 6.1.31-50, 6.4.2-11, 7.3.2-15). In book 7 the final battle against "Assyria" (7.1), the capture of Sardis (7.2-4.14), and the conquest of Babylon through a diversion of the Euphrates (7.5.7-17) are related.

Book 8 contains accounts of Cyrus' kingship and his ideas on monarchy (8.1-2) a ceremonial procession and sacrifices at Babylon (8.3-4), his return to Persia after succeeding his Median uncle on the throne supposedly without strife



(8.5.17-20), the establishment of satrapies (8.6), and his death (8.7). All manuscripts and modern editions of the text conclude with an epilogue containing a gloomy assessment of contemporary (i.e., 4th-century) Persia and the decay of morality since the days of Cyrus (8.8). Although most modern students agree on the date of this epilogue, opinions on who wrote it vary; Steven Hirsch has recently summarized the discussion and has argued (against Delebecque, pp. 405-08, and Breitenbach, cols. 1741-42) that the last chapter is probably not by Xenophon himself. Bodil Due (pp. 16-22), however, considers it part of the original structure of the text, rather than a postscript by another author or an afterthought by Xenophon himself.

Although doubts were already raised in antiquity about the historical validity of Xenophon's portrait of Cyrus (cf. Cicero, *Epistulae ad Quintum Fratrem* 1.1.23), the *Cyropaedia* has been widely read by soldiers, politicians, and teachers, as well as by the educated general public (cf. Münscher). Alexander the Great, Scipio Africanus, Augustus Caesar, Niccolò Machiavelli, Roger Ascham (tutor to Elisabeth I of England), and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet were all familiar with it. Because of Xenophon's portrayal of Cyrus as a benevolent monarch, ruling through persuasion, rather than by force, the work has contributed to the reputation of the founder of the Persian empire as a righteous and tolerant king. It has thus indirectly helped to create the traditional picture of Achaemenid Persia as a healthy and vigorous state in its initial period and as rapidly decaying into tyranny in the second half of the 5th century b.c.e. It is paradoxical that, despite disbelief in its historical reliability, the *Cyropaedia* has profoundly affected modern historiography on the Achaemenid empire.

It is generally agreed that Xenophon did not intend *Cyropaedia* as history (cf. tr. Bizos, p. vi). From that point on opinions again diverge. The work has been considered a historical novel, a romantic history, a didactic treatise, and an educational novel. It is in fact impossible to ascribe the *Cyropaedia* to a specific Greek literary genre; it may have been unique of its kind. Xenophon was possibly following or drawing upon an earlier treatise by the 4th-century author Antisthenes on the life of Cyrus.

Whether or not the *Cyropaedia* is of use as a source for Persian history is still being debated. Classical scholars point out that a number of the so-called "facts" included in it are in error. For example, the Median empire is said to have been led by a weak king and to have come to a peaceful end when Cyrus married the daughter of [Cyaxares](#) (8.5.28; cf. Breitenbach, col. 1709), yet a son



of Astyages named Cyaxares, who succeeded his father as king of Media, is otherwise unknown. According to Babylonian sources (*Nabonidus Chronicle* I, pp. 24-32; inscription on the Cyrus cylinder, v. 13; see [cyrus iv](#)) and to Herodotus (1.127, 1.130), Cyrus overthrew the last king of the Medes, Astyages, in battle; Herodotus mentioned (1.76, 1.79-80) two battles between Cyrus and [Croesus](#), whereas in the *Cyropaedia* only one, resulting in the conquest of Lydia, was reported (7.1, 7.2,2). The name of Cyrus' second son, known from an inscription (DB I 30-31; Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 117, 119) and from Herodotus (3.30) as [Bardiya](#) (Gr. Smerdis) was given by Xenophon as Tanaoxares (8.7.5; cf. Ctesias' Tanyoxarkes, Jacoby, *Fragmente* no. 688 fr. 9.8); Xenophon's list of satrapies (8.6.7) has very few similarities with Herodotus' description (3.89-97) or the lists of countries provided in the Old Persian inscriptions (DB I 12-17; DPe 5-18; DNa 15-30; XPh 13-28; Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 117, 119, 136, 137-38, 151). Egypt was conquered not by Cyrus (pace *Cyropaedia* 8.6.20) but by his son and successor, Cambyses (529-22 b.c.e.), in 525. Many of the Persian names in the *Cyropaedia* are otherwise known only from the 4th century, if at all, or are even obvious fabrications by Xenophon (e.g., Alkeunas, Aglaitadas; for a discussion of the authenticity of such names, cf. Breitenbach, cols. 1712-14). Contrary to Herodotus' report that Cyrus died in battle (1.214; cf. Ctesias, Jacoby, *Fragmente* no. 688 fr. 9.7), Xenophon described his dying at home, apparently of old age (8.7.1-28). This list of historical "errors" is scarcely counterbalanced by Xenophon's better information on the identity of Cyrus' father (in agreement with the Cyrus cylinder), the Persian king Cambyses (cf. Herodotus, 1.107: an ordinary Persian; Ctesias, apud Nicolaus Damascenus, Jacoby, *Fragmente* no. 90 fr. 66.3: a man of low birth married to a goatherd and driven by poverty to robbery). Furthermore, Xenophon, who had been a pupil of Socrates in his youth, drew a portrait of Cyrus that includes a number of typical Socratic features (cf. the portrait of Socrates presented in the guise of the tutor to the Armenian prince; 3.1.38-39).

All these factors have led classical scholars of the *Cyropaedia* to judge it as a work of fiction, with scarcely any historical content. As depicted in the text (1.2.2-16), the Persian educational system appears to have had traits in common with that of Sparta, possibly reflecting Xenophon's sojourn in that city after his banishment from Athens in 394 and his general admiration for the Spartan state. Christopher Tuplin has argued that even generally available contemporary Greek knowledge about Persia did not find its way into the book. Iranists, on the other hand, have pointed to similarities between the *Cyropaedia* and the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī and to the little that is known of



Iranian oral traditions in antiquity. Arthur Christensen noted (pp. 122-35; cf. Pizzagalli p. 41), for instance, that Cyrus' death scene as Xenophon presented it is very similar to deathbed scenes and final speeches in the *Šāh-nāma*; Wolfgang Knauth has compared Cyrus' behavior, attitudes, and discourses in the *Cyropaedia* to instances from the *Šāh-nāma* and to passages in Old Persian royal inscriptions, primarily DNb (Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 138-40), and has concluded that the *Cyropaedia* should be regarded as reflecting a Persian "mirror for princes." Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how far these monarchical virtues are exclusively Persian. Some of them are found in royal texts from all over the world. Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg has found parallels between Cyrus' speech on his deathbed and inscription DNb and has also attempted to elucidate possible mechanisms of transmission (1985). S. K. Eddy has discussed parallels between Xenophon's description of the procession of Cyrus (8.3.1-19) and some of the Persepolis reliefs, notably those on the [Apadana](#).

It seems certain that Xenophon did not use documentary sources in composing the *Cyropaedia*. The knowledge that he acquired during his service with Cyrus the Younger is apparent at several points, often indicated by phrases like *éti kai nūn* (even to this day) During the campaign Xenophon may well have become acquainted with popular oral traditions about Cyrus the Elder (cf. *Cyropaedia* 1.2.1: "Even to this day the barbarians tell in story and song that Cyrus was . . . "). Because of the nature of oral sources, details tend to be confused or to have become misplaced. If Xenophon did tap a Persian oral tradition for the narrative framework of his treatise on the qualities of good leadership, it must certainly have been crowded with anachronisms. The *Cyropaedia* can thus in no way be considered to provide reliable information on 6th-century Persia. The frequent citation of apparently exact numbers for armies and the like should be regarded as a literary device to inspire confidence to the reader. Even for late 5th- and 4th-century Persian history the work can be used only with caution; this stricture is equally applicable to the epilogue of book 8, in which vilifying rhetoric is almost inextricably entangled with a few genuine facts (Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1987).



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