



CYRUS III. CYRUS II THE GREAT

Cyrus II the Great (also known to the Greeks as Cyrus the Elder; b. ca. 600 B.C.E., d. 530 B.C.E.) was the founder of the Achaemenid empire.

Birth and early life. That Cyrus's ancestors had ruled the Persian tribes for several generations is clear from both his inscriptions and contemporary historical reports. In his inscriptions from Pasargadae Cyrus declared "I am Kūruš the king, an Achaemenid," "Kūruš, the great king, an Achaemenid," or "Kūruš", the great king, son of Kambūjiya the king, an Achaemenid" (Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 116; cf. Nylander). An inscription from the Babylonian city of Ur begins "Kuraš, king of all the world, king of the land of Anshan, son of Kambuziya, king of the land of Anshan" (Gadd et al., no. 194 ll. 1-3), and on the Cyrus cylinder (see iv, below) from Babylon Cyrus called himself "son of Cambyses, the great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, the great king, king of Anshan . . . of a family (that) always (exercised) kingship" (Bergen pp. 197-98, ll. 20-22).

Herodotus (7.11) also knew that Cyrus was of royal descent. According to him (1.107-08) and to Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 1.2.1), both of whom drew on Persian traditions, the king was born of the union between the [Persian Cambyses I](#) and Mandane, a daughter of the powerful Median king [Astyages](#), whose capital was at Ecbatana. Most modern scholars regard this version as reliable (e.g., Cameron, p. 224; but cf. Pauly-Wissowa, Suppl. XII, col. 1025). Cicero (*De*



Divinatione 1.23.46), following the Greek historian Dinon, reported that Cyrus became king when he was forty years old and then ruled for thirty years. As Cyrus died in 530 b.c.e., he must have been born around 600 b.c.e. and must have succeeded his father as king of Persia in 559 b.c.e. (cf. Stronach, p. 286).

A number of contradictory stories have been transmitted about Cyrus' birth and early years. Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 1.2.1; cf. 1.4.25) reported one that was in circulation among the Persians themselves. The stories related by Dinon, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Justin can all be traced back to reports by [Herodotus](#) and [Ctesias](#) in the 5th-4th centuries b.c.e. (D'yakonov, pp. 417-24). Herodotus (1.95) knew four stories about Cyrus' origin, though he related only the one he considered most reliable; it, too, contains elements of folklore. In this version Astyages is said to have had a dream that was interpreted by the Magians at his court as a prediction that his grandson Cyrus would take his place as king. Astyages therefore summoned his pregnant daughter Mandane from Persia and, after Cyrus was born, ordered that he be killed. The task was given to the Mede Harpagus, who turned the infant over to Mithradates, one of Astyages' shepherds. Mithradates and his wife decided, however, to raise Cyrus in place of their own stillborn son. When the boy was ten years old Astyages discovered the truth, recognized him as his grandson, and sent him back to his parents in Persia (Herodotus, 1.107-21). Cyrus married [Cassandane](#), herself an Achaemenid princess, and they had two sons, [Cambyses II](#) and [Bardiya](#), as well as three daughters, of whom the names of two, [Atossa](#) and [Artystone](#), are known (Herodotus, 2.1, 3.2, 3.88.2). Roxane seems to have been a third (König, p. 7 par. 12).

In Ctesias' version, which was transmitted with many added details by Nicolaus Damascenus, Cyrus was neither the grandson of Astyages nor even an Achaemenid but rather a man from the nomad tribe of Mardi. His father, Atradates, was forced by poverty to become a bandit, and his mother, Argoste, herded goats. When she became pregnant with Cyrus she saw in a dream that her son would be master of Asia. As a young man Cyrus became a servant at the court of Astyages and then royal [cupbearer](#). The king sent him to suppress a revolt by the Cadusians (q.v.), but instead Cyrus himself rebelled and seized the Median throne (Jacoby, *Fragmente* IIA, pp. 361-64 no. 66). This story contradicts not only that of Herodotus but also the cuneiform inscriptions; it is clearly derived from a Median tradition devised to discredit Cyrus (Schubert, p. 58). It was a precursor of the versions that appeared in Greek romantic literature and is reliable in only a few isolated details (Bauer, pp. 32-35).



Victory over Media. Cyrus succeeded his father as king of the Persian tribes and established his residence at Pasargadae, the center of the Pasargadae tribe, to which the Achaemenid clan belonged. Like his father, he owed allegiance to Astyages, but in 553 b.c.e. he rebelled. According to Herodotus (1.123-28), Astyages' kinsman Harpagus organized a secret conspiracy among the Median nobility and urged the revolt upon Cyrus. When Astyages heard that Cyrus was preparing for war, he sent a courier to summon him to court. Cyrus' refusal to obey led to two major battles. In the first Harpagus, in command of the Median army, deserted to Cyrus, together with most of his troops. Astyages then took the field himself, but the Medes were defeated, and he was captured.

Nicolaus Damascenus also transmitted a lengthy account of these events, drawn primarily from Ctesias' text. In his version a certain groom called Oibaras is supposed to have urged Cyrus to lead the Persians in revolt. The first battle lasted two days and resulted in a complete victory for Astyages. The second, which took place near Pasargadae, also lasted two days, but this time Cyrus' army routed the Medes and captured their camp. Astyages fled to Ecbatana but surrendered soon afterward. Cyrus then ordered the transfer of the treasury from the palace at [Ecbatana](#) to Pasargadae (Jacoby, *Fragmente* IIA, pp. 365-70 no. 66). According to Ctesias, Cyrus executed Spitamas, husband of Astyages' daughter [Amytis](#), then married her himself, thus becoming the legitimate heir to the Median throne (König, p. 2 no. 2; cf. Justin, 6.16; Strabo, 15.3.8).

Two versions of the circumstances surrounding Cyrus' revolt were transmitted by Xenophon. In the [Cyropaedia](#) (8.5.17-19) he reported that the reigning Median king was not Astyages but his son [Cyaxares](#), whose daughter Cyrus married, thus receiving the Median kingdom as a dowry (cf. Hirsch, pp. 81-82). A decade earlier, however, he had noted in *Anabasis* (3.4.11) that the Persians had conquered Ecbatana by force. It is probable that Cyrus had then adopted the titles of the Median rulers, for example, "great king, king of kings, king of the lands," and patterned his court after that of the Medes.

The information from Babylonian sources supports in general outline Herodotus' version of these events. According to the Sippar cylinder of the third regnal year (553 b.c.e.) of Nabonidus, the god Marduk caused "Kuraš, king of the country Anšan" to rise against the Medes; "with a small army he defeated decisively the large troops of the Ummanmanda [the Medes]. He captured Ištumegu [Astyages], king of Ummanmanda and brought him in



chains to his land” (Langdon, p. 220, col. 1 ll. 26-32). In the Babylonian chronicle it is recorded that Astyages advanced against Cyrus, “King of Anšan, for conquest The troops of Ištumeḡu revolted against him and he was taken prisoner. They [delivered him] to Kuraš [. . .]. Kuraš (advanced) against the capital Agamtanu [Ecbatana].” Then Kuraš transferred booty from Ecbatana to Anšan (Grayson, 1975a, p. 106, col. 2 ll. 1-4).

The date of this revolt is somewhat problematic. As in the next line in the chronicle events of Nabonidus’ seventh year are related, Cyrus’ victory over Astyages may thus have occurred in Nabonidus’ sixth year, 550 B.C.E. Some scholars have argued, however, that, as the numbers for the first six years of Nabonidus’ reign have been broken off the tablet, it is not possible to determine the exact date; Robert Drews, for instance, dates Astyages’ defeat in the general six-year period 554-50 B.C.E., with a preference for 554-53 B.C.E., on the basis of the Sippar cylinder (p. 2-4). There may have been a long series of hostilities before Cyrus’ final victory, which would explain the apparent disparity in the dates derived from the two Babylonian documents.

Cyrus’ later conquests. The Persians probably occupied Parthia and Hyrcania and possibly Armenia, all former components of the Median kingdom, in 549-48 B.C.E. According to Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 1.1.4), the Hyrcanians voluntarily accepted Cyrus’ sovereignty. As for Elam, Walther Hinz (Pauly-Wissowa, Suppl. XII, col. 1026) and Ran Zadok (pp. 61-62) have argued that it was taken by the Persians only after the fall of [Babylon](#) in 539 B.C.E. Nevertheless, according to one Babylonian divination text, “a king of Elam will attack and dislodge from the throne” the Babylonian king who “established the dynasty of Harran” (Grayson, 1975b, p. 32, col. 2 ll. 17-21). This king of Elam has been identified as Cyrus II and the Babylonian king as Nabonidus (Grayson, 1975b, pp. 24-25). Elam must thus have been conquered before Cyrus’ attack on Babylonia (cf. de Miroschedji, p. 305 n. 161).

The main source of information on the Persian conquest of Lydia is the work of Herodotus (1.69-91), according to which Lydian troops originally invaded [Cappadocia](#), which had belonged to the Medes. After a fierce battle by the river Halys, [Croesus](#), the Lydian king, withdrew to his capital at Sardis, which was then besieged and taken by the Persians. The fall of Sardis appears to have taken place between October and December, but Herodotus did not give the exact year. According to the fragmentary text of the Babylonian chronicle, in the month Nisan (March-April) of the ninth year of Nabonidus (547 B.C.E.) Cyrus, king of Persia, crossed the Tigris below Arbela. In the month Iyyar



(April-May) he marched to Lydia. “He defeated its king, took its possessions, (and) stationed his garrison” (Grayson, 1975a, p. 107, col. 2 ll. 15-17). If the restoration of “Lydia” is correct, Cyrus’ campaign there took place in 547 B.C.E., but Jack Cargill, for one, believes that the chronicle does not refer to Lydia at all (pp. 109-10, with previous literature).

Cyrus entrusted the conquest of Ionian cities on the Aegean coast and the rest of Asia Minor to his generals, including Harpagus, and returned to Ecbatana in order to prepare for further campaigns. It appears from Herodotus’ report (1.177-78) that, while Harpagus ravaged the cities of western Asia, Cyrus turned his attention to the east and north. In the Bīsotūn inscription (see [bīsotūn iii](#)) Darius mentioned among the countries of the Persian empire [Drangiana](#), [Areia](#), [Choresmia](#), [Bactria](#), Sogdiana, Gandhara, Sattagydia, and [Arachosia](#) (DB I 16-17; Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 117). As Darius’ predecessor, Cambyses II, had fought no wars in the east, Persian rule must already have been extended to Central Asia and the northwestern limits of India in the time of Cyrus. The fortified settlement of Cyreschata (“city of Cyrus”), or Cyropolis, in Sogdiana is further evidence of Cyrus’ activity in the region (for a different view, see [cyropolis](#)). Pliny (*Naturalis Historia* 6.92) reported that Cyrus destroyed Capisa, in northern Afghanistan, and Arrian mentioned both his attack “on the land of the Indians” (apparently Gandhara) and his subjugation of the people of the Ariaspai along the southern borders of Drangiana (*Anabasis* 6.24.3, 3.27.4; cf. Diodorus Siculus, 17.81.1). According to both Herodotus (1.177-78) and [Berossus](#) (Burstein, p. 28), this conquest of the Central Asian territories took place after the defeat of Lydia in 547 B.C.E. but before the Persian advance on “Assyria” (i.e., [Babylonia](#)) in 539 B.C.E.

In the spring of the latter year the Persian army entered the valley of the Diyala (Dīāla) river, and at the beginning of the following October it defeated the Babylonians at the city of Opis and laid siege to Sippar, which fell on 10 October. Two days later the Persians took Babylon, which surrendered without a struggle, according to the Babylonian chronicle. On 29 October Cyrus entered the city in triumph (Grayson, 1975a, pp. 109-10, col. 3 ll. 12-16). In other sources, however, the account of the fall of Babylon is completely different. Berossus described Cyrus’s attitude toward Babylon as hostile (Burstein, p. 28), and both Herodotus (1.188-91) and Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 7.5.7-32.58) reported that the Babylonians put up a determined resistance and lost their capital only after bitter fighting. In later Jewish tradition the story is somewhat garbled: After its conquest Babylon was ruled first by the “Mede” [Darius](#), son of Xerxes,



and then by the Persian Cyrus (Daniel 5:30-31, 6:28).

It was probably about the same time that the Persians extended their control as far as the Arabian peninsula. On Cyrus's cylinder there is a reference among his tributaries to "kings in tents," apparently the chiefs of Arabian tribes, whereas the "kings in palaces" were Phoenician and Syrian rulers. Sidney Smith (pp. 82, 102) and P. R. Dougherty (pp. 161-66) have assumed that the Persians took Arabia and Syria from Nabonidus, attacking them from Asia Minor in about 540 b.c.e., before marching against Babylonia, but the only support for this opinion is a reference in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (7.4.16) to Cyrus' defeat of the Phrygians, Cappadocians, and Arabians before his conquest of Babylon. On the other hand, most scholars believe that Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine submitted to the Persians in 539 B.C.E., immediately after the fall of Babylon, though Kurt Gallinger has suggested a date as late as 526 B.C.E., just before Cambyses II's campaign against Egypt. This hypothesis is based partly on Babylonian texts from Neirab in Syria, among which there are no documents dated to the period 540-28 B.C.E.; Gallinger has therefore concluded that relations between Babylonia and the lands west of the Euphrates were broken off in 539 B.C.E. and reestablished only ten years later (pp. 39-41). On the other hand, Israel Eph'al has shown that the cuneiform documents from Neirab were not written there but were brought there by people from Babylonia (pp. 84-87). Furthermore, Cyrus declared on his cylinder that "all the kings . . . from the Upper to the Lower Sea," that is, from the Phoenician coast to the head of the Persian Gulf, brought tribute to him in Babylon (Berger, p. 198 l. 29). Finally, in 535 b.c.e. Cyrus created a united province consisting of Babylonia and Across-the-River, that is, the lands west of the Euphrates. By 535 at the latest, then, all the lands up to the borders of Egypt had recognized the authority of Cyrus.

Cyrus's religious policies. After the conquest of Mesopotamia Cyrus treated his kingship as a union with the Babylonians, adopting the official title "king of Babylon, king of the lands." He also attempted to restore the normal economic life of the country. He preserved traditional methods of administration throughout his domains and in particular is said to have made almost no alteration in the local political structures of the Phoenicians, the Greek cities in Asia Minor, and some other nations as well. According to the Cyrus cylinder, he permitted foreigners who had been forcibly settled in Babylonia to return to their own lands, including the Jews of the Babylonian captivity, who were also permitted to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. Two versions of his edict



on the latter point have been preserved in the Book of Ezra, one in Hebrew, the other in Aramaic (Bickerman, pp. 72-108).

Cyrus himself may have been a worshiper of *Ahura Mazdā*, but almost nothing is known about his personal beliefs. According to Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 4.5.14), in religious matters Cyrus followed the instruction of the Magians at his court. Although many scholars do not believe that Cyrus was a Zoroastrian (e.g., Widengren, pp. 142-45), Mary Boyce (1988, p. 30) has argued strongly both that he was a Zoroastrian himself and that he thus followed in the footsteps of his Persian forebears back to the 7th century b.c.e., when they were still petty kings of Anshan. She has pointed out that the fire altars and tombs at Pasargadae bespeak Zoroastrian practice and has cited Greek texts as evidence that “Zoroastrian magi” held positions of authority at Cyrus’ court (*Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 56-66).

The emperor nevertheless appears to have initiated a general policy of permitting religious freedom throughout his domains. According to Babylonian texts, he relaxed the harsh rule of Nabonidus. For example, in the so-called “Verse Account of Nabonidus” it is said that Cyrus liberated those who had been oppressed and restored the statues of the Babylonian gods to their sanctuaries (Landsberger and Bauer, pp. 88-94). According to the Babylonian chronicle, Cyrus brought peace to the people of Babylon and kept the army from the temples (Grayson, 1975a, p. 110, col. 3 ll. 16-20). In one inscription from the temple of Eanna in Uruk, the emperor called himself “caretaker of the temples of Esagila and Ezida,” respectively the sanctuaries of Marduk in Babylon and Nabû in Borsippa (Schott, p. 63 no. 31; Walker, p. 94 no. 115). In another inscription, from Ur, he boasted that “the great gods have delivered all the lands into my hands . . . I restored a peaceful habitation to the land” (Gadd et al., no. 194; Walker, p. 94 no. 116). On the Cyrus cylinder he claimed that the god Marduk had ordered him to become ruler of the whole world and to treat the Babylonians with justice; Marduk, satisfied with Cyrus’s “good deeds and his honest mind, ordered him to advance against his city Babylon . . . and went with him as a friend . . . He made him enter his city Babylon without any battle, without inflicting any damage to the city . . . All the people of Babylon . . . greeted him with joy . . . with his help they had returned from death to life.” Finally, according to the same text, the idols that Nabonidus had brought to Babylon from various other Babylonian cities were reinstalled in their former sanctuaries, as were the statues of alien gods from Susa and the cities of northern Mesopotamia. The ruined temples of Babylonia,



Elam, and what had been Assyria were reconstructed. On one fragment of the cylinder Cyrus' institution of new offerings in the temple of Marduk and the reconstruction of the fortifications at Babylon are mentioned (Berger, pp. 196-201). It must be emphasized, however, that in some Babylonian literary texts Cyrus was condemned and Nabonidus glorified (von Soden, pp. 62-68). In one Babylonian prophetic text in particular a "bad" reign that is mentioned was probably that of Cyrus (Grayson, 19756, p. 25, col. 2, ll. 22-24).

Nevertheless, the generally tolerant character of Cyrus' reign is borne out by Jewish sources. Chapters 40-55 of the Book of Isaiah were probably written by a witness to the fall of Babylon, and some extended passages are similar in both spirit and context to contemporary Babylonian texts praising Cyrus and condemning Nabonidus. Cyrus is mentioned twice by name and designated as the anointed one (messiah) of Yahweh: "Thus says the Lord to Kōreš his anointed, Kōreš whom he has taken by his right hand to subdue nations before him . . . I will go before you" (Isaiah 45:1-2). Yahweh also says to Cyrus: "You shall be My shepherd to carry out all My purpose" (Isaiah 44:28). In the Hebrew tradition embodied in 2 Chronicles 36:23 and Ezra 1:1-2 Cyrus is regarded with favor, and he has figured prominently in Jewish thought through the ages (Netzer, p. 35; cf. Jenni, pp. 242-43, 255-56; see [BIBLE](#) i, ii).

Cyrus thus seems generally to have respected the customs and religions of conquered lands. The Persians themselves called him their father (Herodotus, 3.89). The priests of Babylon recognized him as the appointed of Marduk and the Jews as a messiah sent by Yahweh. Even the Greeks considered him a great conqueror and a wise statesman (e.g., Plato, *Laws* 3.694A-D); Xenophon, in his *Cyropaedia*, portrayed him as an ideal ruler (Avery, pp. 529-31; Hirsch, pp. 84-86).

The death of Cyrus. In 530 b.c.e. Cyrus mounted a campaign to Central Asia in order to protect the northeastern borders of his empire from incursions by the Massagetae. During a battle along the lower Oxus ([Āmū Daryā](#)) near the Aral Sea the emperor was not only defeated but also killed. His death has been dated to July or August (Parker and Dubberstein, p. 14), but a recently published document from Kish in Babylonia is dated the 19th day of the month Arahsmna in the ninth regnal year of Cyrus, that is, 4 December 530 b.c.e. (McEwan, no. 123). It therefore appears that the battle must have taken place at the very end of 530.

Conflicting legends about Cyrus' death have been transmitted. The Greek



authors reported that he lost 200,000 men in the battle with the Massagetae, an obvious exaggeration. A particularly popular version was recounted at length by Herodotus, who also noted that many other accounts were in circulation (Herodotus, 1.201-14). According to this version, followed with variations by other classical authors, Cyrus attacked one camp of the Massagetae, but their main forces subsequently defeated his forces and killed him. According to Berossus, Cyrus died in a battle with the Daai ([Dahae](#), Burstein, p. 29), whereas Ctesias claimed that Cyrus' last campaign was fought against the Derbici, a Central Asian tribe, who were assisted by Indian troops. Supposedly it was an Indian spear that wounded Cyrus, who died several days later (König, p. 4 no. 6). According to Xenophon, Cyrus died peacefully in his own capital, having ordered that his corpse be buried in earth, rather than encased in silver or gold (*Cyropaedia* 8.7.25); some scholars believe that this version is rooted in Persian tradition (e.g., Hirsch, p. 84). Herodotus and other Greek authors also relied on Persian oral tradition, however. Although it is not possible now to discern the precise facts of Cyrus' death (Sancisi-Weerdenburg, p. 471), it is known that he was buried at Pasargadae (now Mašhad-e Morḡāb). This fact appears to belie the details reported by Herodotus, but it is possible that Cyrus' body was recovered from the enemy and brought to the capital; Ctesias maintained that Cambyses sent a certain Bagapates to accompany the corpse of Cyrus to the funeral (König, p. 5, no. 9).

The tomb at Pasargadae is a gabled funerary chamber of six stepped courses made of large sandstone blocks (Stronach, pp. 24-43; see v, below). The chamber is entered through a low, narrow doorway. Arrian (*Anabasis* 6.29.4-11) and Strabo (15.3.7) based their descriptions of this chamber on reports by the companions of [Alexander the Great](#), who had visited it personally. It contained Cyrus' golden coffin and a couch covered with hides dyed purple, on which the royal garments, bracelets, daggers, and other attributes were placed. They had, however, already been plundered when Alexander made his second visit to Pasargadae. Since the early Islamic period the tomb of Cyrus has been known as Mašhad-e Mādar-e Solaymān (the tomb of the mother of Solomon).



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