

THE LIFE OF CYRUS THE GREAT

KING
OF THE
WORLD



MATT WATERS

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Preface

Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, reigned from 559 to 530 bce. He was a transformational figure in world history, and many things to many people. To the early Persians and Elamites, Cyrus was an exceptional leader who launched them onto a world stage stretching from Central Asia to Anatolia and beyond, a visionary responsible for a dramatic rise in their fortunes, both figuratively and literally. To the ancient Babylonians, he was cast as a king in the frame of Hammurabi; although of foreign origin, he was represented as fully vested in their traditions. To the ancient Judeans, he was a foundational figure responsible for their freedom from Babylonian domination, literally termed a messiah figure, who facilitated the rebuilding of the Temple of Solomon and inaugurated what today is called the Second Temple period. To ancient Greek and Roman writers, Cyrus was a model ruler, in whom were crystallized the highest qualities of leadership and ingenuity, but who could also be a relentless and ruthless general. In modern times the same superlatives are also applied to Cyrus, who remains for many a nationalistic symbol that encapsulates the glory of the earliest periods of Iranian history.

What made him so “great”? Beyond the epithet “Great King,” of course, which was a title claimed by a host of kings in antiquity, but one that did not often stick after their reigns. For that matter, the epithet “great” has been applied to a number of people throughout history, often (but certainly not always) assigned after their lifetimes: a function of being remarkable in their physical characteristics or outstanding in their abilities or accomplishments. These all applied to Cyrus, the particulars of which will be explored throughout this book. Cyrus the individual remains elusive, however, as he left no surviving testimony beyond a handful of royal inscriptions. We must sift several, often disjointed, ancient perspectives to get a sense of the man. Nonetheless, Cyrus was an object of fascination even in antiquity, among several peoples, and it is remarkable that he attained, and maintained, such positive press in almost all sources, across

cultures and across centuries. Cyrus thus remains a worthy object of attention for the imprint he left on world history, anywhere the ancient Achaemenid Empire touched in antiquity, and its extensive but sometimes subtle legacy thereafter. Unless noted otherwise, references to “Cyrus” are to be understood throughout this book as referring to Cyrus II, in other words, Cyrus the Great. There were other Cyruses, notably Cyrus the Great’s grandfather, who when discussed will be referred to as Cyrus I. Another prominent Cyrus dates from the late fourth century, Cyrus the Great’s great-great-great-grandson, called Cyrus the Younger in modern literature. The name “Cyrus” is, of course, anglicized from the Latin spelling of the name; in Greek it was *Kyros*, in Hebrew *Koresh*, in Elamite and Babylonian *Kurash*, and in Old Persian *Kurush*.

The title of this book is taken from one of the royal epithets from Cyrus’ few extant inscriptions, dedicated shortly after his conquest of what had been the Babylonian Empire in 539 bce. The Babylonian title *šar kiššati*, the “King of the World,” as it applied to Cyrus both implied and indicated just that. (The *š* is pronounced “sh” in English.) The word *kiššati* meant totality, encompassing everything, and indeed some modern translations prefer the translation “universe” to relay that sense. The translation “world” seems sufficient here to demarcate Cyrus’ rule over the realm of humans as distinct from that of the gods. The title *šar kiššati* was not new, but when Cyrus became “King of the World,” it was closer to a literal reality than for any ruler before him in history.

But even then Cyrus did not rule Egypt, for centuries part of the same world, the ancient Near East, the region referred to as the Middle East today. And, of course, the title did not allow for lands beyond the Indus Valley or especially beyond the Himalayas. Nonetheless, Cyrus’ dominion dwarfed the largest empire that preceded him, the Assyrian Empire, and within two generations after his death his successors Cambyses (Cyrus’ son), Darius I (married to Atossa, one of Cyrus’ daughters), and Xerxes (Cyrus’ grandson) had added additional territories, including Egypt and other parts of northeastern Africa as well as the Indus valley (this is shown in [Map 1](#)). This, the Achaemenid Persian Empire, was eclipsed only briefly by Alexander the Great upon his conquest of it, and only matched again by the height of the Roman Empire a few centuries later.

For a figure of such historical import, the record on Cyrus is unfortunately thin. This in turn is no doubt part of the reason Cyrus has not

received as much airtime in modern times, especially when considered with other famous conquerors who followed in his footsteps, such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, or Chinggis Khan. Cyrus may be matched with any of these, though books dedicated to him are far fewer in number than for any of the preceding. Several academic conferences and museum exhibitions have raised the profile of Cyrus and the Achaemenids in recent years. For Cyrus himself, the importance of the inscription called the Cyrus Cylinder continues to reiterate his historical importance during the last generation. The loan of the artifact, usually housed in the British Museum, to the National Museum of Iran in 2010 and, subsequently, a museum tour of the United States in 2013 served as the impetus for several publications and an international conference commemorating Cyrus himself. Important tributes and articles relevant to these events have been published in [Curtis 2013](#), [Finkel 2013](#), [Daryaee 2013](#), and [Shayegan 2019](#).

History is context and interpretation, and that certainly applies to historical reconstruction from a thin, and at times contradictory, record. This treatment of Cyrus is written for the general reader; it examines Cyrus' life from birth to emperor as it may be tracked from a variety of documentary, archaeological, and art historical evidence. I have endeavored to present a balanced view of what we know, what we do not know, and (at least as of the present writing) what we cannot know: to acknowledge uncertainties or instances where there are multiple interpretations of the varied evidence. Primary source references and allusions to the wide-ranging scholarly literature—discussing the particulars of numerous contested interpretations and the related caveats—are for the most part relegated to endnotes and the bibliography, wherein the interested reader may find references to a variety of Cyrus-related topics. For the reader new to this material, I recommend first consultation of the brief timeline and chronological table, and especially Appendix A on the ancient source material and its difficulties, to get some initial orientation into the diverse and complex world that was the ancient Near East in the mid-first millennium bce.

This book is a distillation of scholarly work that has occupied much of my research focus for close to three decades. The ideas and syntheses from several articles and parts of two books—revisited, reconsidered, and rewritten for an introductory audience—find expression here. My own fascination with Cyrus, and the Achaemenid Empire, stems from its

unrivaled place as the preeminent geopolitical power for more than two centuries in the ancient world, heirs to and innovators within several streams of tradition, and diverse cultures, in the ancient Near East. The written records of these civilizations reach back centuries before the Persian Empire's genesis. Somewhat ironically, we still rely on the Persians' contemporaries, the ancient Greeks, for narrative material describing what they knew, or thought they knew, about Cyrus. Despite the Greeks' own foundational place in the Western tradition, it is important to remember that during Cyrus' time many of them were subject peoples on the western fringe of the Achaemenid Empire.

Translations of most documentary sources herein are my own, unless otherwise noted. Translations from the Hebrew Bible are adapted from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*. Where used in the endnotes, abbreviations follow those in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* and in *The Assyrian Dictionary* of the University of Chicago, a multivolume work more commonly called the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary or, just simply, *CAD*. The English spelling of the names of various ancient authors and actors (and, for that matter, places and other names) is not always consistent. This is an unavoidable issue in normalizing words from different languages and scripts, and there is thus significant variety of spelling in modern works. Herein, more recognizable names from ancient Near Eastern history are generally spelled in their Latinized form, for example, Cyrus (rather than Kurush, or Kurash) or Darius (rather than Dareios or Darayavaush). Other names approximate standard usage in modern works, for example, Ashurbanipal.

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and Margaret Root. In particular I wish to acknowledge David Stronach, to whose memory and influence this work is dedicated. David’s work will be cited frequently throughout the volume for his seminal contributions as excavator at Cyrus’ capital, Pasargadae, for his fundamental publications on Cyrus’ career, and not least for his interest and support of my own work. He is missed. Finally, and the last shall be first, my thanks and appreciation to my wife Michelle, the embodiment of patience.



Map 1 The Achaemenid Empire, c. 500 bce (reign of Darius I), after *The Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. P. Bang and W. Scheidel, 2013.

Chronological Table

	<i>Iran</i>	<i>Anatolia</i>	<i>Greater Mesopotamia</i>			<i>Egypt</i>
	Middle Elamite period (c. 1500–1000)		<i>Levant</i>	<i>Assyria</i>	<i>Babylonia</i>	
1000 BCE	Susa (Khuzistan)	Anshan/Parsumash (Fars)				
	<i>Neo-Elamite period I</i>		Kingdoms of Israel and Judah	<i>Neo-Assyrian period (until 609)</i>	<i>Neo-Babylonian period (until 539)</i>	
	Persian/Iranian migrations	Persian/Iranian migrations Semi-sedentary pastoralism		Shalmaneser III	Frequent friction with Assyria	Third Intermediate period Dynasties XXI–XXV
750 BCE	<i>Neo-Elamite period II</i>		(subject to Assyria)	Sargon II	(subject to Assyria)	
	Shutruk-Nahhunte II	(subject to Elamite king in Susa)	Kingdoms of Urartu, Phrygia, Lydia	Sennacherib		
650 BCE	Te'umman	Medes dominant in northern Iran		Esarhaddon		
	Huban-haltash III	Teispes		Ashurbanipal		Dynasty XXVI
	<i>Neo-Elamite period III</i>	Cyrus I		Fall of Assyria	Nabopolassar Nebuchadnezzar II	
550 BCE		Cambyses I	Sack of Jerusalem		Nabonidus	
		Astyages	Croesus of Lydia			
500 BCE	Cyrus the Great ACHAEMENID PERSIAN EMPIRE					Amasis Psammetichus III

Timeline

Major chronological markers and kings referenced in this book (all dates bce):

1000– Assyrian Empire
 609
 721– Reign of Sargon II, King of Assyria
 705
 717– Reign of Shutruk-Nahhunte II, King of Elam
 699
 705– Reign of Sennacherib, King of Assyria
 681
 681– Reign of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria
 669
 c. 680– Mermnad Dynasty of Lydia (last king was Croesus)
 540s
 669– Reign of Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria
 630
 664?– Reign of Te’umman, King of Elam
 653
 c. 650 First evidence of Persian military activity in Elam
 646 Assyrian sack of Elamite Susa
 c. 640 Cyrus I, King of Parsumash (Anshan) pays homage to Ashurbanipal;
 Cyrus’ son Arukku sent to Assyrian court at Nineveh
 626– Babylonian Empire
 539
 c. 620– Height of Median power
 550
 612 Sack of Nineveh by Medes and Babylonians
 587/586 Sack of Jerusalem by Babylonians (Nebuchadnezzar II)
 559– Reign of Cyrus (II) the Great
 530
 556– Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon
 539
 550 Cyrus defeats Astyages, King of the Medes
 540s Cyrus conquers Anatolia and defeats Croesus, King of Lydia
 539 Cyrus conquers Babylonia; Cyrus Cylinder dedicated shortly thereafter
 538 Cyrus and Cambyses II take part in the New Year Festival rites at the
 Marduk temple in Babylon
 538 Death of Cyrus’ primary wife, Queen Cassandane
 530s– Main construction at Pasargadae
 510s
 530 Death of Cyrus the Great
 530– Reign of Cambyses II
 522

- 525– Cambyes conquers Egypt
522
522 Death of Cambyses II in April. Reign of Bardiya (6 months) and
usurpation of Darius I
522– Reign of Darius I
486
520– Bisotun Inscription of Darius I
519
510s Darius I's campaigns into Europe (Balkans) and Indus Valley
499– Persians quell Ionian revolt
493
490 Persian expedition to Eretria and Attica; Battle of Marathon
486– Reign of Xerxes
465
484 Revolts in Babylonia
480– Xerxes' invasion of Greece
479

1

Introduction

The Kings of Anshan

I am Cyrus, King of the World, Great King, Strong King, King of Babylon, King of the Four Quarters, the son of Cambyses, Great King, King of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, Great King, King of Anshan, great-grandson of Teispes, Great King, King of Anshan, of an eternal line of kingship.

—Cyrus Cylinder, lines 20–21, 539 bce

Scope and Scale: The Cusp of the First World Empire

Two million square miles. That is the estimated expanse of the Achaemenid Empire at its height c. 500 bce. It included terrain of all types and climes: mountains, plateaus, flood plains, wide rivers and seas, forbidding deserts, vast steppes, and thick forests. From its core in Parsa, the modern Iranian province of Fars, the Empire encompassed the known world from the western spurs of the Himalayas and modern Kazakhstan to the Sahara Desert and modern Libya and Sudan, from the Indus Valley to the Balkans (Map 1). Most of this territory was conquered by Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Empire, who reigned from 559 to 530 bce, the fourth king in his dynastic line as relayed in the opening quote from the Cyrus Cylinder, a foundational text for the study of Cyrus shown in [Figure 1.1](#) and that will be referenced many times in this book. His conquests included the three major powers of his time: the Medes in northern Iran, the kingdom of Lydia in Anatolia, and the Babylonian Empire that encompassed Mesopotamia as well as much of the Levant. Cyrus' military and organizational accomplishments were without rival in world history to that point, and one seldom surpassed since. The Achaemenid Persian Empire as a geopolitical unit lasted from c. 550 to 330 bce, from the reign of Cyrus the Great to

Darius III, whose death in 330 marked for all intents and purposes the formal passing of the throne to Alexander III (“the Great”) of Macedon. The word “Achaemenid” is both a dynastic and a periodizing label. It stems from the name Achaemenes (Old Persian *Haxāmaniš*), the eponymous ancestor from whom Darius I (r. 522–486) traced his lineage and to whom he also linked the lineage of the Empire’s founder, Cyrus.



Figure 1.1 The Cyrus Cylinder from Babylon, BM 90920, 539 bce.

© Trustees of The British Museum.

Cyrus the Great is one of the most pivotal, yet underappreciated, figures in history. He nonetheless remains an enigma in many ways, viewed through multiple traditions in which he still looms large. But before we consider Cyrus himself, attention is due to the milieu in which he lived, the influences upon him, those nations and peoples beyond his own with whom his forefathers interacted. This involves assessment of a broad range of

documentary, archaeological, and art historical evidence, as well as their manifold problems of interpretation (see Appendix A). In other words, this book is more than a simple narrative of what Cyrus did while on military campaign. Cyrus' empire may be considered the culmination of 2,000 years of ancient history. His military and diplomatic acumen resulted in a unification of all the major kingdoms that encompassed the ancient Near East: broadly defined, the widely diverse populations of Iran (ancient Elam and various Iranian kingdoms, including the Medes), of Anatolia (ancient Urartu, Phrygia, and Lydia), and of Greater Mesopotamia and the Levant. The only exceptions to these sprawling conquests were northeastern Africa—the kingdom of Egypt and territories stretching into Libya, the Sudan, and Ethiopia—and the Indus Valley; these were conquered by his son Cambyses and by his son-in-law Darius I in the two decades after Cyrus' death in 530.

Cyrus' conquests in Anatolia in the 540s included several Greek city-states, those Ionian and Dorian Greeks who had colonized several important cities in the western part of what is now Turkey. Cyrus' extension of Persian power in these municipalities, separated by the Aegean Sea but still closely linked to their mother-cities in Greece, laid the foundations for the so-called Persian wars fought by Darius I and Xerxes in the early fifth century *bce*. To the Persians, of course, these were Greek wars, campaigns unto the far western fringes of their empire, the impetus for which was both retribution and imperialism, which brought Cyrus' grandson Xerxes into Europe and the Greek peninsula. The infamous battles of Thermopylae and Salamis are touchstones of the Western tradition, the tipping points of traditional, historical narratives that symbolize the epitome of a free people fighting to remain so. These battles remain such powerful symbols that they overshadow Xerxes' successful campaign in the sacking (twice!) of Athens and the receipt of tribute from many city-states of Greece, itself symbolic of their inclusion in the Empire. That perspective frames the narrative from the Achaemenid point of view.

The extent of Cyrus' conquests, and the staying power of the Achaemenid Empire, can be difficult to grasp, especially considered in light of the previous era. For the periods before 500 *bce*, detailed chronological tables organized by regions such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, and Iran usually indicate a distinct dynasty or kingdom for each region, occasionally one that overlaps its immediate geographic neighbors. Less frequently, a

single power will fill multiple sections of the table, for example, Egypt in the fourteenth century or Assyria in the eighth and seventh centuries. In the time of Cyrus and his successors, almost all the timeline's sections are subsumed under one power, Achaemenid Persia. The rapid pace and efficiency with which Cyrus spread Persian rule laid the foundations for an empire that endured for more than two centuries, one that left an indelible, if not always traceable, impact on its successors (see Chronological Table).

To study Cyrus is also to study the Persian imperial impetus, the seminal, if often overlooked, impact of the Empire on many subject and peripheral peoples, not just Greeks. To take yet another example, within the biblical tradition, Cyrus was, literally, the anointed one, a messiah figure—termed as such in the Book of Isaiah.¹ He was Yahweh's chosen one to unite the lands and to lay the foundations for the so-called Second Temple period of Judean history. Jerusalem had been sacked, the Temple of Solomon destroyed, and many of its people (including the royal house) removed to Babylon by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II in 587–586. After Cyrus' conquest of Babylonia in 539, these Judean exiles were allowed to return home. This resulted in the reconstruction of the Temple and inaugurated its renewal under Persian aegis. These returning exiles arrived bearing Cyrus' message of liberation and incorporated it into their own traditions (see [Chapters 4 and 6](#)).

To frame Cyrus' life, conquests, and empire, it is fitting to start with a series of questions that have spurred modern historians for generations. Pierre Briant in the prologue to his monumental work on Achaemenid history, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, framed them as appropriate to the entire Achaemenid dynasty but particularly apropos to Cyrus' rise in the mid-sixth century bce:

How can we explain this sudden outburst into history by a people and a state hitherto practically unknown? How can we explain not only that this people could forge military forces sufficient to achieve conquests as impressive as they were rapid, but also that, as early as the reign of Cyrus, it had available the technological and intellectual equipment that made the planning and building of Pasargadae possible?²

This book aims to broach these same questions, as it frames Cyrus the Great's place in history. He was more than a successful general and charismatic leader. He deserves a place in the reckoning of other famous

leaders and conquerors in world history who came after him: from Alexander the Great, for whom Cyrus served in many ways as a model (Chapter 6), to Julius Caesar and beyond. In fact, it is not until the time of Chinggis Khan that a comparable case may be fielded, one who, like Cyrus, built his empire from modest beginnings and, so it may seem to the present-day observer, exploded onto the world stage with little warning.³ That Cyrus was able to conquer so much territory, and yet receive almost universally positive press as an individual and as a ruler in both contemporary and later sources—Babylonian, Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Persian—is a stunning testimony to the man and to the king.

Cyrus' legacy in modern times can be conflicted, especially within Iran itself and among the Iranian diaspora after the 1979 revolution and the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In no small part, this conflicted legacy stems from his near absence in the indigenous, ancient Iranian documentary tradition after the Achaemenid period; this phenomenon poses several problems in studying such a major historical figure, problems that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. In the twentieth century, Cyrus the Great became a nationalistic symbol of the Pahlavi dynasty, which privileged Iran's pre-Islamic (especially the Achaemenid) heritage over the Islamic. Indeed, this pre-Islamic history—to the exclusion of a millennium and a half of Iran's more recent Islamic heritage—was the centerpiece of the Pahlavi view of Iranian national identity. This adaptation culminated in 1971 with an over-the-top celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of Iranian monarchy, held at Persepolis and sponsored by Mohammad Reza Shah, complete with a full-scale parade and a lavish recreation of Achaemenid court spectacles. The criticisms of this event, prominent among them by the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini who had accused the Shah of indifference to Islam, were quite fierce.⁴

An Achaemenid Renaissance

In consideration of the scale of his achievements and the dearth of surviving information about him, Cyrus the Great remains a larger-than-life legend. With the rediscovery of several ancient Near Eastern languages over the last roughly 150 years, we have a better, but still evolving, sense of the whole of ancient Near Eastern history. The languages recorded by various cuneiform scripts, including the main ones of the Achaemenid Empire's royal

inscriptions and administration, were lost to memory: Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian were only deciphered in the later nineteenth century. Study of these sources, their translation, and interpretation of those already in museum collections worldwide, let alone those awaiting discovery, remains a work-in-progress. Extant sources in the other main language of the Empire, Aramaic, though the language itself was never lost, are minimal. Most of these documents were parchment, and as such, with few exceptions, they rarely stood the test of time. It is only within the last few decades of modern scholarship that the traditional picture of Achaemenid history—one almost entirely reliant on ancient Greek sources like Herodotus and Ctesias, with the occasional spicing from material in the Hebrew Bible—was modified in any substantial way through incorporation of indigenous evidence.

Greek sources preserved fantastic stories, still necessary to write any narrative history of the Achaemenid period, but their accuracy and reliability must be considered at every point. The Greeks were not writing history as we define it today, though Herodotus especially is considered a founding father of what became, centuries later, an academic discipline. Rather, Herodotus and other Greek authors were seeking information to allow them to understand the world, and the Greeks' place within it, in terms that went beyond the traditional renderings of what we call myth or legend. Many of the Greek accounts straddle that line too effectively, as is the case, for example, of Herodotus' narrative account of Cyrus the Great. Differentiating fact from fiction can be a daunting task. For a longer treatment of the various sources and their difficulties, the reader is directed to Appendix A.

During the 1980s, a series of academic conferences gave impetus to a fundamental reworking of our understanding of the first Persian Empire.⁵ The perspective introduced by this sea change in Achaemenid studies is often termed the “New Achaemenid History” in academic circles. Its purpose was to loosen the so-called tyranny of Greece over early Persian history. This colorful phrasing has been used to describe the principal reliance on, and often uncritical acceptance of, Greek sources in reconstructing Achaemenid history. As alluded to above, the increasing availability, accessibility, and approachability of indigenous sources—textual, art historical, and archaeological—have afforded new vistas and allowed a Near Eastern (more specifically here: a Persian) perspective to be