
Cyrus the Mythical: Perceptions and Memory of the Great King

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In 1971, more than two millennia after the collapse of the Achaemenid Empire, dozens of world leaders once again flocked to its desert capital of Persepolis. They came at the behest of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, reigning monarch of Iran and self-professed successor to an extensive line of Persian kings. The visitors were treated to extravagant accommodations, including elaborate historical reenactments and a massive display of fireworks over the ancient city. It was all part of a celebration meant to commemorate the 2,500-year anniversary of the founding of the empire by Cyrus the Great, the legendary ruler who was known in his own time as “King of the Four Corners of the World.” In an emotional speech delivered in front of Cyrus’ tomb, Pahlavi praised his perceived predecessor as the “extraordinary emancipator of History” and “one of the most noble sons of Humanity.”¹

While the 1971 Persepolis Celebration was undoubtedly a political stunt meant to support a failing regime, it did succeed in reinvigorating the myth of Cyrus. This legend, cultivated over millennia, depicts the founder of the Achaemenid Dynasty as the perfect leader and a model for subsequent generations of rulers to follow. It is a construct formed by centuries of fictional narratives, propaganda, and a desire to invent the ideal king. These qualities can be seen in sources written throughout history, from those that were contemporaneous with Cyrus, to classical and biblical accounts. Over the course of thousands of years, the pictures painted by these sources gradually merged together to create a mythical and fictitious image of the king as a wise and benevolent ruler without flaws and unmatched in greatness. The truth of Cyrus is, unfortunately, lost to history—clouded beyond recognition by hundreds of generations seeking to mold the king to fit their own idyllic narratives. Today, however, it is clear that the ancient king remains remembered through the lens of the lasting “Cyrus myth.”

Cyrus in the Contemporary Sources

Accounts of Cyrus composed during his lifetime are a rarity; the passage of more than twenty-five hundred years has served to reduce many such records to dust. The few that survive today were carved into cuneiform tablets and exist largely in fragmentary portions that have been translated in recent centuries by historians and archaeologists. Two of the most complete sources available to us today, the Cyrus Cylinder and Nabonidus Chronicle, are immeasurably important in shaping our understanding and perception of the founder of the Achaemenid Empire. Each text offered a somewhat contrasting account of Cyrus’ arrival in Babylon in 539 BC, but their many similarities have allowed us to craft a working narrative of the conquest informed by both Persian and Mesopotamian voices.

¹ Talinn Grigor, “Preserving the Antique Modern: Persepolis ‘71.” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 2, no. 1 (2005): 22-29.

The first of these two records, the Cyrus Cylinder, was a traditional Babylonian “building text,” placed into the foundations of a temple to the city’s patron god Marduk. It appears as a first-person perspective, ostensibly inscribed by the king himself, as a supposed firsthand account of Cyrus’ peaceful and divinely ordained conquest of Babylon. According to the cylinder, Marduk called on Cyrus to rescue the people of Mesopotamia from the cruel reign of the previous ruler Nabonidus. Cyrus, answering the call and accompanied by Marduk himself, led his “teeming army” across the Tigris River and into Babylon without a fight.² Nabonidus was deposed, and all the lesser sovereigns of the region came to do Cyrus homage. The new king graciously returned the images, statues, and peoples who had been captive in Babylon (including the followers of Judaism) to their places of origin, and set about restoring the many sanctuaries and shrines across the city—hence the placement of the cylinder in a temple that was presumably rebuilt during this period. At the end of the narrative, Cyrus referred to Ashurbanipal, the last king of Assyria, as “a king who came before me,” seemingly linking himself to the long line of Babylonian royalty.³

While the Cyrus Cylinder is a unique and fascinating account and one that has undoubtedly served to reinforce his image as a benevolent and humane ruler, it does not necessarily reflect the reality of the great king’s reign. The constant reverence and respect given to Marduk and its interment beneath his temple point to the cylinder as a piece of Persian propaganda, used to placate the people of Babylon. It also justified Cyrus’ claim to the city by depicting Nabonidus as having fallen out of favor with the gods, and thus being unfit to rule. His alignment with Ashurbanipal and supposed acceptance of Babylonian tradition was likewise a common tactic of conquerors seeking to legitimize their governance.⁴

The Cyrus Cylinder was furthermore refuted by the account given in the Nabonidus Chronicle, the second important contemporary source on the king. This chronicle covered much of the same time period as the cylinder, but detailed the arrival of Cyrus in a slightly less venerable manner. In this narrative, Cyrus’ conquests of Media in 550 BC and Lydia in 547 BC had brought him to the edge of Mesopotamia. His path to Babylon in 539 BC was far from the bloodless venture described in the cylinder; the chronicle told of a battle at Opis against the Babylonian army, and how the victorious Cyrus proceeded to send one of his military commanders ahead to seize the city (iii.12). This general entered without conflict, but the king himself did not arrive until three weeks later, long after any potential resistance had been subdued. While the chronicle did mention that Cyrus set about rebuilding the city’s monuments and participated in many of its traditional ceremonies, its final lines took particular care to reference a celebratory religious procession during which he donned Persian garb rather than the customary Babylonian; a gesture evidently meant to reaffirm to the people that they were now under the control of a foreign ruler.⁵

The primary reason that the Nabonidus Chronicle should be regarded as a superior source to the Cyrus Cylinder is its general reliability. It was part of a series of “Babylonian Chronicles,” infrequent records carved by astronomers and based on certain astrological cycles.⁶ This ensured that the chronicles were not created at the behest of any king or other power, and thus provided a largely detached and unbiased appraisal of events. While the chronicle’s depiction did not necessarily portray Cyrus in an overtly negative light, it was noticeably less accommodating of his actions; his “slaughter” of the people of Akkad en route to Babylon and his refusal to enter the city for three weeks until it was secured paint a much less benign and kingly image than that constructed by the

² Mark Chavalas, *The Ancient Near East: Historical Sources in Translation* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 428-429.

³ Chavalas, *The Ancient Near East*, 428-429.

⁴ Amélie Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983): 88.

⁵ Amélie Kuhrt, “Cyrus the Great of Persia: Images and Realities” in *Representations of Political Power: Case Histories in Times of Change and Dissolving Order in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Marlies Heines and Marian Feldman (Warsaw, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 178.

⁶ Kuhrt, *Images and Realities*, 176.

cylinder (iii.14). The explicit mention of the king's "Elamite dress" during a religious ceremony also seems to allude to the idea that he was not the universally accepted and celebrated liberator portrayed by his propagandists (iii.26).

Overall, the contemporary sources on Cyrus are of varied usefulness in constructing a realistic perception of the empire's founder. The Cyrus Cylinder offers plentiful information, but is based partially in fiction; conversely, the Nabonidus Chronicle remains a reliable record, but is frustratingly fragmented and vague. Still, there is much to be gained from these sources in the places that they overlap. For instance, one can infer that the king was an immensely resourceful and calculating leader, who understood the importance of appeasing conquered peoples by superficial acceptance of religious tradition and alignment with past dynasties. He was also capable of conveying his dominance through shows of force and assertion of cultural superiority. These qualities, among others, would inform the perceptions of later generations and continue to surface in narratives of Cyrus throughout history.

Cyrus in Classical Traditions

Fascination with Cyrus did not end with his death in 530 BC, or even when the empire he founded collapsed under the strain of Macedonian invasion two-hundred years later. Narratives of his exploits continued to be crafted by historians well into the period of classical antiquity, resulting in a much more abundant trove of evidence than what can be gathered from the few remaining contemporary sources. However, this vast expanse of knowledge is not without flaws. Many authors based their accounts from oral traditions that had been repeated over centuries, which led to some events being skewed beyond recognition. Others could be criticized for profound biases and blatantly fictitious plots, meant to construct a version of Cyrus that best fit their narrative and ideological goals. Still, much can be gained from these sources through cross-reference with one another, as well as with other extant records, such as the Cyrus Cylinder and Nabonidus Chronicle.

One of the two accounts most fundamentally responsible for our mythological perception of Cyrus is undoubtedly Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. This epic series of eight books depicted Cyrus as the ideal king, raised as a vassal in the Median court to his grandfather Astyages and trained as a great general and cunning diplomat. Throughout the course of Media's lengthy war with the Babylonians, Cyrus traversed the near east and forged alliances between his kingdom and many others. In the end, Cyrus and his allies were able to defeat and capture Babylon in 539 (Xen. Cy. 7.5.20-42). Cyaxares, successor to Astyages and Cyrus' uncle, ultimately bestowed upon his nephew the Median kingdom (Xen. Cy. 8.5.19-20). Part of the final book of Xenophon's narrative was a lengthy discussion of how Persia quickly fell from glory following Cyrus' death, solidifying the idea that his rule had been uniquely successful due to the characteristics of leadership that he possessed.

Though widely considered by today's scholars to be one of the first great fictional novels, the *Cyropaedia*, according to Xenophon and many of his contemporaries, was a true work of history. Xenophon said as much in the opening pages of the first book, where he claimed to have crafted the work from his own inquiries while traversing the Persian Empire.⁷ However, the vast amount of dialogue between characters and the portrayal of numerous imagined events prove that Xenophon wrote not of the real Cyrus, but of his own ideal image of a perfect ruler and what that represented. For example, his portrayal of Cyrus as a faithful vassal to the Median King Cyaxares and the eventual inheritor of his great kingdom had no basis in historical fact; Cyaxares was a narrative invention; all other sources tell us that Cyrus overthrew the Medes to establish his own empire.⁸

⁷ Philip Stadter, "Fictional Narrative in the *Cyropaedia*," *The American Journal of Philology* 112, no. 4 (1991): 461.

⁸ Stadter, 463-464.

Depicting the future king as a patient ally who earned his success through loyalty, however, was more pertinent to Xenophon's narrative goal of crafting the ideal king.

While Xenophon's work was more akin to that of philosophers like Plato than it was to true histories, it still doubtlessly worked to enhance the strength of the Cyrus myth. A similar, yet more measured and immensely more important work was Herodotus' *Histories*. This vast chronicle, composed of nine books and written in the fifth century B.C, traced the saga of Greco-Persian relations from the time of Cyrus' founding of the empire to its loss against the Greeks at Marathon in 490. While Herodotus generally took a biased stance against the Persian kings, he told the story of Cyrus much differently. Like Xenophon, he posited that the eventual founder of the Achaemenid Empire was a grandson of the Median ruler Astyages, who foresaw in a dream his eventual overthrow at the hands of Cyrus (Hdt. 1.107). Astyages ordered the boy killed, but miraculous circumstances resulted in the future king's survival and adoption into a peasant family. Herodotus' narrative went on to detail Cyrus' prodigal leadership skills as a young boy and eventual discovery of his royal origins. He ultimately led a successful rebellion against Median authority, removing Astyages from power and becoming King of Persia (Hdt. 1.125-128). From this fairy-tale origin story, Herodotus' Cyrus went on to have immense success across Asia, including victories against Lydia and Babylon. Ultimately, though, the Great King fell in combat against the Massagetae tribe of northeastern Iran, marking the beginning of a long moral decline for the Persian Empire (Hdt. 1.214-216).

While Herodotus' managed to present a more restrained account of Cyrus' life than other historians such as Xenophon, he was still clearly taken with the idea of a "good" king and pursued a storytelling angle that portrayed him as such.⁹ One feature of Herodotus' narrative use of Cyrus was in his repeated reference to how the king "freed" the Persian people from Median oppression. One could argue that Herodotus sought to contrast the Persians of his own day to Cyrus by differentiating between their use of tyranny and oppression to subdue populations to the original king's desire to free his people. Such an objective would align well with Herodotus' primary narrative goal of disparaging the Persians of Darius and Xerxes.

One massive figure who was evidently influenced by the works of Herodotus and Xenophon was Alexander the Great. The account of his defeat of the Persian Empire by the Greco-Roman historian Arrian contained numerous references to the Macedonian king's fascination with his Persian precursors, including Cyrus. In one such occasion near the end of his decade-long campaign, Alexander supposedly led his fatigued forces across the inhospitable Gedrosian Desert. His justification for the crossing was to surpass Cyrus, whom legends claimed had once entered the desert with his entire army and escaped with only seven men (Arr. 6.24.2-3). While his true motivations for the Gedrosian expedition remain dubious, it seems clear that Alexander was deeply influenced by the ever-prominent Cyrus myth. In another instance conveyed by Arrian, Alexander visited the tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae in Iran in 324 B.C. He was enraged to find it in a state of disarray, desecrated by thieves and left ruined. Cyrus' remains were strewn about the interior chamber, and his coffin was destroyed. Alexander demanded that the mausoleum be restored and resealed as a sign of respect to his perceived predecessor (Arr. 6.29).

While the reliability of Arrian may be questionable, one can assume that Alexander would have doubtlessly been influenced by the legend of Cyrus over the course of his foray into Persia. Having been educated by the great Aristotle, it is impossible to imagine that the young king would not have read Herodotus' *Histories*, and his exposure to Xenophon is similarly likely.¹⁰ These two authors' construction of Cyrus as an ideal king likely played a significant role in informing both

⁹ Harry C. Avery, "Herodotus' Picture of Cyrus," *The American Journal of Philology* 93, no. 4 (1972): 532-535.

¹⁰ Kieran McGroarty, "Did Alexander the Great Read Xenophon?" *Hermathena* 181 (2006): 105-107.

Alexander's reverence towards him and his desire to surpass his legacy. Consequently, his acceptance of the Cyrus myth and its inclusion in works such as Arrian's would only serve to further reinforce the image of the ancient king as the model ruler and one to be admired by future generations.

In the end, these classical sources do little to help us separate truth from fiction in the story of Cyrus. While they are beneficial in establishing the historical facts of his reign and necessary as some of the only extant records of his life, any description of Cyrus' character and exploits were generally clouded by the authors' own narrative goals. However, historians like Herodotus, Xenophon, and Arrian are not entirely to blame for their occasionally outlandish claims about the king—much of their information likely came from oral traditions and stories told over hundreds of years, which doubtlessly distorted the truth in various ways.¹¹ Despite whether their many fallacies were intentional or not, it does seem appropriate to place much of the blame for Cyrus' mythological perception on these authors, given that their accounts would go on to inspire the next two-thousand years of historical scholarship in the field of Achaemenid Persia.

Cyrus in the Biblical Tradition

Though only briefly mentioned, Cyrus' inclusion in the Bible and the subsequent reverence he received from later Hebrew scholars also served to boost his reputation as a benign humanitarian. This tradition was largely rooted in his freeing of the Jewish people from their seventy-year captivity in Babylon, which was cited in contemporary records such as the Cyrus Cylinder. Similar to other sources that have been discussed, however, the Bible and later accounts by historians like Josephus could be criticized for imagining what Cyrus represented rather than exploring who he truly was.

The biblical story of Cyrus was limited to the later chapters of the Book of Isaiah, which were purported to have been written by a prophet who lived during the early years of the Achaemenid Empire and has been referred to as Deutero-Isaiah (as the original Isaiah had lived roughly two centuries earlier).¹² Cyrus was discussed between the forty-first and forty-fifth chapters as having been the “shepherd” of God, called to release the Jews from Babylon (Isa. 44.28). While God acknowledged that Cyrus did not recognize his divine authority, he was still moved by the earthly king's righteousness and made him the anointed champion of the Hebrews. In the end, he commanded Cyrus to “rebuild my city (Jerusalem) and set my exiles free.” (Isa. 45.13).

While the Book of Isaiah would not generally be regarded as a scholarly text, it commands much importance in the historiography of Cyrus. While many historians have doubted that it was an immediately contemporary source, it was very likely written not long after Cyrus' reign.¹³ Thus, in a way comparable to the Nabonidus Chronicle, the Book of Isaiah represented an account of the king given from outside the Persian viewpoint. It also served as another testament to Cyrus' well-documented religious tolerance, a major factor in the development of his legendary status that had been attested to by both the contemporary and classical sources.

The biblical image of Cyrus also clearly influenced later historians and became even more widespread through their interpretations. One such example could be seen in the works of Josephus, a Jewish-Roman scholar writing in the first century A.D. The eleventh book of his *Antiquities of the Jews* depicted a similar situation to that laid out in the Bible, with Cyrus having been called by God to Babylon. After his liberation of the city, Cyrus read the prophecy given by the Book of Isaiah which claimed that he would one day free the Jews and return them to Israel (Jos. XI.1.2). Awed by this prediction, ostensibly written centuries earlier, Cyrus set about releasing the Jewish people back to

¹¹ Stadter, *Fictional Narrative in the Cyropaideia*, 463.

¹² Moshe Reiss, “Cyrus as Messiah,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2012): 159.

¹³ Reiss, *Cyrus as Messiah*, 159.

their homeland, and ensured that they would be given all of the resources necessary to rebuild their temple and practice their religion. Josephus also transcribed a letter that the king had supposedly written to his satraps in Syria, describing the plight of the Jews and his intent to restore their city (Jos. XI.1.3).

Realistically, it seems unlikely that divine power inspired Cyrus to release the Jews from their captivity. More likely, he sought to reduce tension in the city and around the empire by engaging in religious tolerance and permitting the Jewish population to leave Babylon on their own accord. Josephus' assertion that Cyrus supported the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem after reading the prophecies in the Book of Isaiah is even more uncertain, given that modern religious historians do not believe that these chapters were authored until after Cyrus' death. Some scholars, however, have interpreted the reconstruction of Jerusalem as having been simply made possible by Cyrus' freeing of the Jews, and misunderstood by Josephus as the king endorsing the temple project.¹⁴

Regardless of its historical authenticity, the account of Cyrus in the Bible has unquestionably had an immeasurable bearing on history's perception of the king. As one of the most widely-read and circulated books of all time, its portrayal of Cyrus has arguably had more of an impact than any other source could and has contributed to his legend immensely. Likewise, Josephus' prominent Jewish history also served to propagate the myth of Cyrus to the masses, and would go on to influence many other biblical historians over the centuries to continue growing the legend of Cyrus.

Cyrus in Iranian Memory

The passage of time has made it difficult to tell how well Cyrus was remembered, if at all, throughout the pre-Islamic Arsacid and Sassanian periods. Unlike his immediate successors, who carved massive monuments into stone at places like Bisitun and Naqsh-e Rostam, the founder of the Achaemenid Dynasty left behind relatively few archaeological footprints beyond his modest tomb. Still, thanks largely in part to the mythological perception created by the sources discussed above, Cyrus is well-remembered in modern traditions. Even after the ouster of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1979, the idealized image of Cyrus as the originator of the Iranian state has clearly continued to this day.

The most obvious and gaudy invocation of Cyrus was Reza Shah Pahlavi's use of his legend for his own personal gain at the 1971 Iranian 2,500th Anniversary celebrations at Persepolis. The aforementioned celebration, which brought together leaders from across the globe to superficially honor the legacy of Cyrus and his Achaemenid Empire, was widely criticized as a vehicle for the shah to increase his own personal prestige.¹⁵ While the shah was rightfully condemned both within Iran and around the world for his squandering of the nation's wealth on such insincere events as Persepolis '71, he could hardly be criticized as the first to use Cyrus' legacy to achieve personal objectives; as we have seen, parties ranging from Herodotus and Xenophon to the Bible have attempted to connect themselves to Cyrus in order to advance their goals.

Another event that served as a testament to the ancient king's lasting impact and legacy in Iran was the temporary return of the Cyrus Cylinder to its homeland in 2010. The cylinder, which had remained in the possession of the British Museum since its rediscovery in 1879, was released to the Iranian government on a three-month loan. However, the vast demand to see the cylinder, redubbed the "Cyrus Charter" by the Iranian Museum, resulted in a protracted visit of nearly a year.¹⁶ During this period, the cylinder served a dual purpose as a tool of both teaching and propaganda. While it was first and foremost an object used to educate Iranians on their pre-Islamic

¹⁴ Kuhrt, *Images and Realities*, 172-173.

¹⁵ Grigor, *Preserving the Antique Modern: Persepolis '71*, 22-29.

¹⁶ Manuchehr Sanadjian, "Islamic Rule and the Pre-Islamic Blessing, the "Homecoming" of the Cyrus Cylinder," *Dialectical Anthropology* 35, no. 4 (December 2011): 461-462.

history, it was simultaneously utilized by the ruling regime as a way to attach themselves to the Cyrus myth. Despite their general disregard for the nation's early history, the clerical elite saw an opportunity in the Cyrus Cylinder to further embed themselves in the traditional image of Iranian rule—promoting themselves much like Reza Shah four decades earlier, in a display clerics had bemoaned at the time. In a clear irony of history, the Cyrus Cylinder, originally issued as a work of Achaemenid propaganda, came to play this role again more than two and a half millennia later.¹⁷

Similarly, collective memory of Cyrus can also be seen in the way that Iranians gather yearly at his tomb in Pasargadae to pay their respects to the man that many still perceive as the founder of the nation. While these gatherings had initially begun as simple birthday celebrations that drew a crowd of a few hundred, they have more recently become politically-charged rallies aimed at critiquing the Islamic government. In one such instance, thousands of Iranians gathered at Pasargadae and chanted “Iran is our country, Cyrus is our father.”¹⁸ It is obvious that the image of Cyrus invoked by modern Iranians has been heavily informed by the numerous fictitious portrayals of him throughout history; this Cyrus is one meant to embody the cause of the Iranian people and their pursuit of freedom.

In the end, it seems clear that Cyrus the Great remains well-remembered in modern Iran. While this memory may not be an entirely accurate or justified one, given the vast disparities among the parties who invoke his memory, it is nonetheless the product of the “Cyrus myth.” The development of this legend over thousands of years is a testament to how easily ancient history can become construed and dramatized by the personal biases of our sources and their pursuit of narrative goals. Through antique carvings like the Cyrus Cylinder, which glorified Cyrus as the greatest king of his day, to classical and biblical sources who sought to mold the king into their idealized version of leadership, the truth of who the founder of the Achaemenid Empire really was has been lost to history. What remains is a heavily fictionalized perception of a great leader, and an example of how tradition and myth can combine to create a lasting and persistent image in our collective memory.

¹⁷ Sanadjian, *Islamic Rule and the Pre-Islamic Blessing*, 470-473.

¹⁸ Annelies Van de Ven, “De-Revolutionising the Monuments of Iran,” *Heritage, Sustainability, and Social Justice* 29, no. 3 (2017): 19-21.