

Leaders of History

CYRUS THE GREAT

Circa 559-529 BC

One of the most prominent and romantic characters in the history of the Asian world, before its conquest by Alexander of Macedon, is Cyrus the Great; not as a sage or prophet, not as the founder of new religious systems, not even as a lawgiver, but as the founder and organizer of the greatest empire the world has seen, next to that of the Romans. He was practically the last of the great Asiatic emperors, absorbing in his dominions those acquired by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Lydians. He was also the first who brought Asia into intimate contact with Europe and its influences, and thus may be regarded as the link between the old Asian world and the Greek civilization.

This renowned name of Cyrus represents the Persian power, the last of the great monarchies that ruled the Asian world until its conquest by the Greeks. It is widely believed that Persia came suddenly into prominence in the middle of the seventh century before Christ. Prior to this time, it was comparatively unknown and unimportant, and was one of the dependent provinces of Media, whose religion, language, and customs were not very dissimilar to its own.

Persia was a small, rocky, hilly, arid country about three hundred miles long by two hundred and fifty wide, situated south of Media, having the Persian Gulf as its southern boundary, the Zagros Mountains on the west separating it from Babylonia, and a great and almost impassable desert on the east, so that it was easily defended. Its population was composed of hardy, warlike, and religious people, condemned to poverty and incessant toil by the difficulty of getting a living on sterile and unproductive hills, except in a few favored localities. The climate was warm in summer and cold in winter, but on the whole more temperate than might be supposed from a region situated so near the tropics—between the twenty-fifth and thirtieth degrees of latitude. It was an elevated country, more than three thousand feet above the sea, and was favorable to the cultivation of the fruits and flowers that have ever been most prized, but vigilance and incessant toil were necessary, turning easily from agricultural labors to the fatigues and dangers of war.

The real wealth of the country was in the flocks and herds that browsed in the valleys and plains. They could boast of no large city, like the Median Ecbatana, or like Babylon—Pasargadae, their ancient capital, being comparatively small and deficient in architectural monuments. The people lived chiefly in villages and hamlets, and were governed, like the Israelites under the Judges, by independent chieftains, none of whom attained the rank and power of kings until about one hundred years before the birth of Cyrus.

It is generally admitted that these people came from a branch of the Aryan family, whose original settlements are supposed to have been on the high table-lands of Central Asia east of the Caspian Sea, probably in Bactria. They emigrated from that dreary and inhospitable country.

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Conquering or driving away Turanian tribes and migrating to the southwest in search of more fruitful fields and fertile valleys, they found a region which has ever since borne a name—Iran—that evidently commemorated the proud title of the Aryan race. All theories as to their movements before their authentic history begins are based on conjecture and speculation.

While the Iranians worshipped a supreme deity of goodness, they also recognized a supreme deity of evil, but the final triumph of the good was a conspicuous article of their faith. In close logical connection with this recognition of a supreme power in the universe was the belief of a future state and of future rewards and punishments.

In process of time the priests of the Zoroastrian (monotheistic pre-Islamic) faith became unduly powerful and enslaved the people by many superstitions, such as the multiplication of rites and ceremonies and the interpretation of dreams and omens. They united spiritual with temporal authority, as a powerful priesthood is apt to do—a fact which the Christian priesthood of the Middle Ages made evident in the Occidental world.

In the time of Cyrus, the Magi (priests of ancient Persia) had become a sort of sacerdotal (priestly) caste. They were the trusted ministers of kings and exercised a controlling influence over the people. They assumed a stately air, wore white and flowing robes, and were adept in the arts of sorcery and magic. They were even consulted by kings and chieftains, as if they possessed prophetic power. They were a picturesque body of men, with their mystic wands, their impressive robes, their tall caps, appealing by their long incantations and frequent ceremonies and prayers to the eye and to the ear.

The Iranians, both Medes and Persians, were acquainted with the art of writing. Darius signed a decree which his nobles presented to him in writing. In common with the Babylonians they used the same alphabetic system, though their languages were unlike—namely, the cuneiform or arrowhead or wedge-shaped characters, as seen in the celebrated inscriptions of Darius on the side of a high rock thirty feet from the ground. We cannot determine whether the Medes and Persians brought their alphabet from their original settlements in Central Asia, or derived it from the Turanian and Semitic nations with which they came in contact.

Of these Persians, Cyrus combined in himself all that was admirable in his countrymen and making so strong an impression on the Greeks that he is presented by their historians as an ideal prince, invested with all those virtues which the medieval romance writers have ascribed to the knights of chivalry.

The Persians were ruled by independent chieftains, or petty kings, who acknowledged fealty to Media; so that Persia was really a province of Media, as Burgundy was of France in the Middle Ages, and as Babylonia at one period was of Assyria. The most prominent of these chieftains or princes was Achaemenes, who is regarded as the founder of the Persian monarchy. To this royal family of the Achaemenidae Cyrus belonged. His father Cambyses, called by some a satrap and by others a king, married, according to Herodotus, a daughter of Astyages, the last of the Median monarchs.

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The youth and education of Cyrus are invested with poetic interest by both Herodotus and Xenophon, but their narratives have no historical authority in the eyes of critics; they belong to the realm of romance rather than authentic history. Nevertheless, the legend of Cyrus is beautiful and has been repeated by all succeeding historians.

According to this legend, Astyages—a luxurious and superstitious monarch, who had really built up the Median empire—had a dream that troubled him, which being interpreted by the Magi, was to the effect that his daughter Mandanê (for he had no legitimate son) would be married to a prince whose heir should seize the supreme power of Media. To prevent this, he married her to a prince beneath her rank, for whom he felt no fear—Cambyses, the chief governor or king of Persia, who ruled a territory to the South, about one fifth the size of Media, and which practically was a dependent province. Another dream which alarmed Astyages still further, in spite of his precaution, induced him to send for his daughter, so that having her in his power he might easily destroy her offspring. As soon as Cyrus was born, therefore, in the royal palace, the king entrusted the infant prince to one of the principal officers of his court—Harpagus—with peremptory orders to destroy him. Harpagus, although he professed unconditional obedience to his monarch, had scruples about taking the life of one so near the throne, the grandson of the king and presumptive heir of the monarchy. So he, in turn, entrusted the royal infant to the care of a herdsman, in whom he had implicit confidence, with orders to kill him. The herdsman had a tender-hearted and conscientious wife who had just given birth to a dead child, and she persuaded her husband to substitute the dead child for the living one, deck it out in the royal costume, and expose it to wild beasts. This was done, and Cyrus remained the supposed child of the shepherd. The secret was well kept for ten years, and both Astyages and Harpagus supposed that Cyrus was slain.

Cyrus meanwhile grew up among the mountains, exposed to heat and cold, hunger and fatigue, and thus was early inured to danger and hardship. Added to personal beauty was remarkable courage, frankness, and brightness, so that he took the lead of other boys in their amusements. One day they played king, and Cyrus was chosen to represent royalty, which he acted so literally as to beat the son of a Median nobleman for disobedience. The indignant and angry father complained at once to the king, and Astyages sent for the herdsman and his supposed son to attend him in his palace. When the two mountaineers were ushered into the royal presence, Astyages was so struck with the beauty, wit, and boldness of the boy that he made earnest inquiries of the herdsman, who was forced to tell the truth, and confessed that the youth was not his son, but had been put into his hands by Harpagus with orders to destroy him. The royal origin of Cyrus was now apparent, and the king sent for Harpagus, who corroborated the statement of the herdsman. Astyages dissembled his wrath.

Herodotus tells us that Astyages took the boy, unmistakably his grandson and heir, to his palace to be educated according to his rank. Cyrus was now brought up with every honor and the greatest care, taught to hunt and ride and shoot with the bow like the highest nobles. He soon distinguished himself for his feats in horsemanship and skill in hunting wild animals; winning universal admiration; and disarming envy by his tact, amiability, and generosity, which were as marked as his intellectual brilliancy—being altogether a model of reproachless chivalry.

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For some reason, however, the fears and jealousy of Astyages were renewed, and Cyrus was sent to his father in Persia with costly gifts. Possibly he was recalled by Cambyses himself, for a father by all the Eastern codes had a right to the person of his son.

No sooner was Cyrus established in Persia—a country which it would seem he had never before seen—than he was sought by the discontented Persians to head a revolt against their masters, and he availed himself of the disaffection of Harpagus, the most influential of the Median noblemen, for the dethronement of his grandfather. Persia arose in rebellion against Media. A war ensued, and in a battle between the conflicting forces Astyages was defeated and taken prisoner but was kindly treated by his magnanimous conqueror. This battle ended the Median ascendancy, and Cyrus became the monarch of both Media and Persia.

Since the Medes belonged to the same Aryan family as the Persians, and had the same language, religion, and institutions, with slight differences, and lived among the mountains exposed to an uncongenial climate with extremes of heat and cold, and were doomed to hard and incessant labors for a subsistence, it will be seen that what we have said of Persia equally applies to Media, except the possession by the latter of political power as wielded by the sovereign of a larger State.

Before a central power was established in Media, the country had been ruled by chieftains, who acknowledged as their supreme lord the King of Assyria, who reigned in Nineveh. Among these chieftains was a remarkable man called Deioces, so upright and able that he was elected king. Deioces reigned fifty-three years wisely and well, bequeathing the kingdom he had founded to his son Phraortes, under whom Media became independent of Assyria. His son and successor Cyaxares, who died 593 BC, was a successful warrior and conqueror and was the founder of Median greatness. With the assistance of Nabopolassar, a Babylonian general who had also revolted against the Assyrian monarch, Cyaxares succeeded, after repeated failures, in taking Nineveh and destroying the great Assyrian Empire which had ruled the Eastern world for several centuries. The northern and eastern provinces were annexed to Media, while the Babylonian valley of the Euphrates in the south fell to the share of Nabopolassar, who established the Babylonian ascendancy. This, in its turn, was greatly augmented by his son Nebuchadnezzar, one of the most famous conquerors of antiquity, whose empire became more extensive even than the Assyrian. He reigned in Babylon with unparalleled splendor and made his capital the wonder and the admiration of the world, enriching and ornamenting it with palaces, temples, and hanging gardens, and strengthening its defenses to such a marvelous degree that it was deemed impregnable.

Cyaxares the Median meanwhile raised up a rival power to that of Babylon, although he devoted himself to warlike expeditions more than to the adornment of his capital. He penetrated with his invincible troops as far to the west as Lydia in Asia Minor, then ruled by the father of Croesus, and thus became known to the Ionian cities which the Greeks had colonized. After a brilliant reign, Cyaxares transmitted his empire to an unworthy son—Astyages, the grandfather of Cyrus.

With Astyages perished the Median Empire, which had lasted only about one hundred years, and Media was incorporated with Persia. Henceforth, the Medes and Persians are spoken of as

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virtually one nation, similar in religion and customs, and furnishing equally the best cavalry in the world. Under Cyrus, they became the ascendent power in Asia, and maintained their ascendancy until their conquest by Alexander. Media now became the residence of the Persian kings, whose palaces at Ecbatana, Susa, and Persepolis nearly rivaled those of Babylon. Even modern Persia comprises the ancient Media.

The reign of Cyrus properly begins with the conquest of Media, or rather its union with Persia, 549 BC. We know, however, but little of the career of Cyrus after he became monarch of both Persia and Media, until he was forty years of age. He was probably engaged in the conquest of various hordes before his memorable Lydian campaign. But we are in ignorance of his most active years, when he was exposed to the greatest dangers and hardships, and when he became perfected in the military art. Whether Cyrus obtained military fame or not in his wars against the Turanians, he doubtless proved himself a benefactor to humanity more in arresting the tide of Scythian invasion than by those conquests which have given him immortality.

When Cyrus had cemented his empire by the conquest of the Turanian nations, especially those that dwelt between the Caspian and Black seas, his attention was drawn to Lydia, the most powerful kingdom of western Asia, whose monarch, Croesus, reigned at Sardis in Asian magnificence. Lydia was not much known to distant States until the reign of Gyges, about 716 BC, who made war on the Dorian and Ionian Greek colonies on the coast of Asia Minor, the chief of which were Miletus, Smyrna, Colophon, and Ephesus. His successor Ardys continued this warfare but was obliged to desist because of an invasion of the Cimmerians from beyond the Caucasus, driven away from their homes by the Scythians. His grandson Alyattes, greatest of the Lydian monarchs, succeeded in expelling the Cimmerians from Lydia. After subduing some of the maritime cities of Asia Minor, this monarch faced the Medes, who had advanced their empire to the river Halys, the eastern boundary of Lydia, which flows northwardly into the Black Sea.

For five years, Alyattes fought the Medes under Cyaxares with varying success, and the war ended by the marriage of the daughter of the Lydian king with Astyages. After this, Alyattes reigned forty-three years and was buried in a tomb whose magnificence was little short of the grandest of the Egyptian monuments.

Croesus was rich, luxurious, and intellectual. His wealth, obtained chiefly from the mines of his kingdom, was a marvel to the Greeks. His capital, Sardis, became the largest in western Asia and one of the most luxurious cities known to antiquity. Croesus continued the warfare on the Greek cities of Asia and forced them to become his tributaries. He brought under his sway most of the nations to the west of the Halys, and though never so great a warrior as his father, he became very powerful. He was as generous in his gifts as he was magnificent in his tastes. His offerings to the oracle at Delphi were unprecedented in their value, when he sought advice as to the wisdom of engaging in war with Cyrus. Of the three great Asian empires, Croesus now saw his father's ally, Babylon, under a weak and dissolute ruler; Media, absorbed into Persia under the power of a valiant and successful conqueror; and his own empire, Lydia, threatened with attack by the growing ambition of Persia. Herodotus says he "was led to consider whether it were possible to check the growing power of that people."

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It was the misfortune of Croesus to overrate his strength—an error often seen in the career of fortunate men, especially those who enter upon a great inheritance. It does not appear that Croesus desired war with Persia, but he did not dread it, and felt confident that he could overcome a man whose chief conquests had been made over barbarians. Perhaps he felt the necessity of contending with Cyrus before that warrior's victories and prestige should become overwhelming, for the Persian monarch obviously aimed at absorbing all Asia in his empire; at any rate, when informed by the oracle at Delphi that if he fought with the Persians he would destroy a mighty empire, Croesus interpreted the response in his own favor.

Croesus made great preparations for the approaching contest, which was to settle the destiny of Asia Minor. The Greeks were on his side, for they feared the Persians more than they did the Lydians. With the aid of Sparta, the most warlike of the Grecian States, he advanced to meet the Persian conqueror, not however without the expostulation of some of his wisest counselors. One of them, according to Herodotus, ventured to address him with these plain words: "Thou art about, O King, to make war against men who wear leather trousers and other garments of leather; who feed not on what they like, but on what they can get from a soil which is sterile and unfriendly; who do not indulge in wine, but drink water; who possess no figs, nor anything which is good to eat. If, then, thou conquerest them, what canst thou get from them, seeing that they have nothing at all? But if they conquer thee, consider how much that is precious thou wilt lose; if they once get a taste of our pleasant things, they will keep such a hold of them that we never shall be able to make them lose their grasp."

The Lydians began the attack by crossing the Halys and entering the enemy's territory. The first battle took place at Pteria in Cappadocia, near Sinope on the Euxine, but was indecisive. Both parties fought bravely, and the slaughter on both sides was dreadful, the Lydians being the most numerous, and the Persians the most highly disciplined. After the battle of Pteria, Croesus withdrew his army to his own territories and retired upon his capital, with a view of augmenting his forces; while Cyrus, with the instinct of a conqueror, ventured to cross the Halys in pursuit and to march rapidly on Sardis before the enemy could collect another army. Prompt decision and swiftness of movement characterize all successful warriors, and here it was that Cyrus showed his military genius. Before Croesus was fully prepared for another fight, Cyrus was at the gates of Sardis. But the Lydian king rallied what forces he could and led them out to battle.

The Lydians were superior in cavalry; seeing which, Cyrus, with that fertility of resource which marked his whole career, collected together the camels which transported his baggage and provisions, and placed them in the front of his array, since the horse, according to Herodotus, has a natural dread of the camel and cannot abide his sight or his smell. The result was as Cyrus calculated; the cavalry of the Lydians turned around and galloped away. The Lydians fought bravely but were driven within the walls of their capital. Cyrus vigorously prosecuted the siege, which lasted only fourteen days, since an attack was made on the side of the city which was undefended, and which was supposed to be impregnable and unassailable. The proud city fell by assault and was given up to plunder. Croesus himself was taken alive, after a reign of fourteen years, and the mighty Lydia became a Persian province.

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There is something unusually touching in the fate of Croesus after so great prosperity. Saved by Cyrus from an ignominious and painful death, such as the barbarous customs of war then made common, the unhappy Lydian monarch became, it is said, the friend and admirer of the Conqueror, and was present in his future expeditions, and even proved a wise and faithful counselor. If some proud monarchs by the fortune of war have fallen suddenly from as lofty an eminence as that of Croesus, it is certain that few have yielded with nobler submission than he to the decrees of fate.

The fall of Sardis—546 BC—was followed by the submission of all the States that were dependent on Lydia. Even the Grecian colonies in Asia Minor were annexed to the Persian Empire.

The conquest of the Ionian cities, first by Croesus and then by Cyrus, was attended with important political consequences. Before the time of Croesus, the Greek cities of Asia were independent. Had they combined together for offense and defense, with the assistance of Sparta and Athens, they might have resisted the attacks of both Lydians and Persians. But the autonomy of cities and states, favorable as it was to the development of art, literature, and commerce, as well as of individual genius in all departments of knowledge and enterprise, was not calculated to make a people politically powerful. Only a strong central power enables a country to resist hostile aggressions on a great scale. Thus, Greece herself ultimately fell into the hands of Philip, and afterward into those of the Romans.

The conquest of the Ionian cities also introduced into Asia Minor and perhaps into Europe Asian customs, luxuries, and wealth hitherto unknown. Certainly, when Persia became an irresistible power and ruled the conquered countries by satraps and royal governors, it assimilated the Greeks with Asians, and modified the forms of social life; it brought Asia and Europe together and produced a rivalry which finally ended in the battle of Marathon and the subsequent Asiatic victories of Alexander.

The annexation of Asia Minor to the empire of Cyrus was followed by a protracted war with the barbarians on his eastern boundaries. The imperfect subjugation of barbaric nations living in Central Asia occupied Cyrus, it is thought, about twelve years. He pushed his conquests to the Iaxartes on the north and Afghanistan on the east, reducing that vast country which lies between the Caspian Sea and the deserts of Tartary (the region from the Caspian Sea to the Pacific Ocean).

Cyrus was advancing in years before he undertook the conquest of Babylon, the most important of all his undertakings, and for which his other conquests were preparatory. At the age of sixty, Cyrus, 538 BC, advanced against Nabonidas, the proud king of Babylon—the only remaining power in Asia that was still formidable. The Babylonian Empire, which had arisen on the ruins of the Assyrian, had lasted only about one hundred years. Babylon the great—“the glory of kingdoms,” “the praise of the whole earth,” with its priests and its nobles—was now to fall, for its abominations cried aloud to heaven for punishment.

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This great city was built on both sides of the Euphrates, was fifteen miles square, with gardens and fields capable of supporting a large population and was stocked with provisions to maintain a siege of indefinite length against any enemy. The accounts of its walls and fortifications exceed belief, estimated by Herodotus to be three hundred and fifty feet in height, with a wide moat surrounding them, which could not be bridged or crossed by an invading army. The soldiers of Nabonidas looked with derision on the veteran forces of Cyrus, although they were inured to the hardships and privations of incessant war. To all appearance, the city was impregnable and could be taken only by unusual methods. But the genius of the Persian conqueror, according to traditional accounts, surmounted all difficulties. Who else would have thought of diverting the Euphrates from its bed into the canals and gigantic reservoirs which Nebuchadnezzar had built for purposes of irrigation? Yet this seems to have been done. Taking advantage of a festival, when the whole population was off their guard, Cyrus advanced, under the cover of a dark night, by the bed of the river, now dry, and easily surprised the drunken city, slaying the king, with a thousand of his lords, as he was banqueting in his palace. The slightest accident or miscarriage would have defeated so bold an operation. The success of Cyrus had all the mystery and solemnity of a providential event. Though no miracle was wrought, the fall of Babylon was as wonderful as the passage of the Israelites across the Red Sea, or the crumbling walls of Jericho before the blasts of the trumpets of Joshua.

However, this account is to be taken with some reserve, since by the discoveries of historical documents, it would seem that dissension and treachery within had much to do with facilitating the entrance of the invader. Nabonidas, the second successor of Nebuchadnezzar, had quarreled with the priesthood of Babylon, and neglected the worship of Bel-Marduk and Nebo, the special patron gods of that city. The invasion of Cyrus—a monotheist like themselves—must have seemed to them a special providence from Jehovah; indeed, we know that it did, from the records in II Chronicles 36: 22, 23: “The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing.” The same words occur in the beginning of the Book of Ezra, both referring to the sending home of the Jews after the fall of Babylon; the forty-sixth chapter of Isaiah also: “The Lord saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure.”

Babylon was not at that time leveled with the ground, but became one of the capitals of the Persian Empire, where the Persian monarch resided for more than half the year. Although the Babylonian Empire began with Nabopolassar, 625 BC, on the destruction of Nineveh, yet Babylon was a very ancient city and the capital of the ancient Chaldean monarchy, which lasted under various dynasties from about 2400 BC to 1300 BC, when it was taken by the Assyrians under Tig Vathi-Nin. The great Assyrian Empire, which thus absorbed ancient Babylonia, lasted between six and seven hundred years, according to Herodotus, although recent discoveries and inscriptions make its continuance much longer, and was the dominant power of Asia during the most interesting period of Jewish history, until taken by Cyaxares the Median. The limits of the empire varied at different times, for the conquered States which composed it were held together by a precarious tenure. But even in its greatest strength it was inferior in size and power to the Empire of Cyrus. To check rebellion, the warlike monarchs were obliged to reconquer, imposing not only tribute and fealty, but overrunning the rebellious countries with fire and sword, and

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carrying away captive to distant cities a large part of the population as slaves. Thus, at one time, two hundred thousand Jews were transported to Assyria, and the “Ten Tribes” were scattered over the Eastern world, never more to return to Palestine.

On the rebellion of Nabopolassar, in 625 BC, Babylon recovered not only its ancient independence, but more than its ancient prestige; yet the empire of which it was the capital lasted only about the same length of time as Media and Lydia—the most powerful monarchies existing when Cyrus was born. Babylon, however, during its brief dominion, after having been subject to Assyria for seven hundred years, reappeared in unparalleled splendor and was probably the most magnificent capital the ancient world ever saw until Rome arose. When the proud conqueror of Palestine beheld the magnificence he had created, little did he dream that “this great Babylon which he had built” would become such a desolation that its very site would be uncertain.

We should naturally suppose that Cyrus, with the kings of Asia prostrate before his satraps, would have been contented to enjoy the fruits of his labors; but there is no limit to man’s ambition. He sought for new worlds to conquer and perished, as some historians maintain, in an unsuccessful war with some unknown barbarians on the northeastern boundaries of his empire. Unbounded as is human ambition, there is a limit to human aggrandizement. Great conquerors are raised up by providence to accomplish certain results for civilization, and when these are attained, when their mission is ended, they often pass away ingloriously—assassinated or defeated or destroyed by self-indulgence, as the case may be. It seems to have been the mission of Cyrus to destroy the ascendancy of the Middle Eastern despotisms in western Asia, that a new empire might be erected by nobler races, who should establish a reign of law.

For the first time in Asia there was, on the accession of Cyrus to unlimited power, a recognition of justice and the adoration of one supreme deity ruling in goodness and truth. This may be the reason why Cyrus treated the captive Jews with so great generosity. No political reason will account for sending back to Palestine thousands of captives with imperial presents, to erect once more their sacred Temple and rebuild their sacred city.

Of all the Persian monarchs, Cyrus was the best beloved. He is represented as the incarnation of “sweetness and light.” When a mere boy, he delights all with whom he is brought into contact by his wit and valor. The king of Media accepts his reproofs and admires his wisdom; the nobles of Media are won by his urbanity and magnanimity. All historians praise his simple habits and unbounded generosity. In an age when polygamy was the vice of kings, he was contented with one wife, whom he loved and honored. He rejected great presents and thought it was better to give than to receive. He treated women with delicacy and captives with magnanimity. He conducted war with unknown mildness and converted the conquered into friends. He exalted the dignity of labor and scorned all baseness and lies.

Whether he fell in battle, or died a natural death in one of his palaces, he was buried in the ancient but modest capital of the ancient Persians, Pasargadae; and his tomb was intact in the time of Alexander, who visited it—a sort of marble chapel raised on a marble platform thirty-six feet high, in which was deposited a gilt sarcophagus, together with Babylonian tapestries, Persian

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weapons, and rare jewels of great value. This was the inscription on his tomb: “O man, I am Kurush, the son of Kambujiya, who founded the greatness of Persia and ruled Asia; grudge me not this monument.”

Cyrus was succeeded by his son Cambyses, who though not devoid of fine qualities was jealous and tyrannical. He caused his own brother Smerdis to be put to death. He completed the conquests of his father by adding Egypt to his empire. In a fit of remorse for the murder of his brother, he committed suicide, and the empire was usurped by a Magian impostor, called Gaumata, who claimed to be the second son of Cyrus. His reign, however, was short, he being slain by Darius the son of Hystaspes, belonging to another branch of the royal family. Darius was a great general and statesman, who reorganized the empire and raised it to the zenith of its power and glory. It extended from the Greek islands on the west to India on the east. This monarch even penetrated to the Danube with his armies but made no permanent conquest in Europe. He made Susa his chief capital, and also built Persepolis, the ruins of which attest its ancient magnificence.

It was during the reign of Darius that Persia came in contact with Greece, in consequence of the revolt of the Ionian cities of Asia Minor, which, however, was easily suppressed by the Persian satrap. Then followed two invasions of Greece itself by the Persians under the generals of Darius, and their defeat at Marathon by Miltiades.

Darius was succeeded by Xerxes, the Ahasuerus of the Hebrew Scriptures, whose invasion of Greece with the largest army the world ever saw properly belongs to Grecian history. It was reserved for the heroes of Plataea to teach the world the lesson that the strength of armies is not in multitudes, but in discipline.

On the fall of the Persian Empire three hundred years after the fall of Babylon, and the establishment of the Greek rule in Asia under the generals of Alexander, Persia proper did not cease to be formidable. Under the Sassanian princes, the ambition of the Achaemenians was revived. Sapor defied Rome herself and dragged the Emperor Valerian in disgraceful captivity to Ctesiphon, his capital. Sapor II was the conqueror of the Emperor Julian, and Chosroes was an equally formidable adversary. In the year AD 617, Persian warriors advanced to the walls of Constantinople and drove the Emperor Heraclius to despair.

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Comprehension Questions

1. Summarize the legends of Cyrus and how he gained power.
2. Show the prejudice problems with the description of the Persians.
3. Explain Cyrus's importance in the Bible.
4. What do you think of the description of Cyrus's character?
5. Summarize Cyrus's conquests and their importance, such as Babylon.
6. Summarize the theological significance of Cyrus.
7. Explain the importance of Xenophon's writings on Cyrus.

Going Deeper

8. Study the various theories regarding the identity of Darius, and his relationship with Cyrus.
For example:
<http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1563&context=auss>
(This external source has not been reviewed; exercise caution.)
9. Study the issues of Xenophon's writings and the question of his accuracy.
10. Study the various writings from Persia and Babylonia and their significance.