

Cyrus the Great: Father of the Iranian Nation

Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe

29 October 2015, Celebration of Cyrus the Great Day

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The exemplary career of Cyrus the Persian, Kouroush as he would have been known by his people, was a man who created a nation, and changed the balance of power in the Near East. During his reign – from 559 to 530BC – he was instrumental in elevating Iran into a major power, which after his lifetime grew in stature and can rightly be considered a superpower of the ancient world. The Achaemenians conceived of Iran as a state, and turned the concept into reality. Its survival no less than its independence was the legacy they bequeathed to posterity. The endeavour begun by Cyrus, and consolidated by Darius led to the most extensive empire in the history of the world, a ‘synthesis of ancient civilizations’ (R. Ghirshman, *Iran*, Penguin Books, reprint 1978, p. 127), which included Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, the Greek cities and islands and part of India.

The mark of a truly great man is not just what he does during the course of his life, but the legacy he leaves behind. Cyrus the empire builder appears to have had a clear-sighted vision: expansion of territorial boundaries and the maintenance of vast areas of conquered lands, coupled with respect of foreign peoples, their religions and cultures. We are here today to commemorate the historic event of October 29, 539, the entry into Babylon by Cyrus, the triumphalism tempered by an acknowledgement of immense responsibility for the upholding of this ancient city’s traditions; the encounter with a multiplicity of inhabitants – natives as well as captives – and the edict, what we today refer to as the ‘Cyrus Cylinder’, setting out the conquerors’ world view. This is why we remain fascinated by this great man. The conquest of Babylon was a seminal event, brilliantly crafted by Persian ‘persuasive propaganda’ (A.T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, University of Chicago Press 1948, p. 52) which meant that in the eyes of his Babylonian subjects, Cyrus was never an alien king of Parsa/Persia. This was to create a template for future monarchs, not just of Cyrus’s own Achaemenid dynasty, but the Arsacid Parthians and Sasanians who followed. Almost a millennial span of Zoroastrian Iran’s imperial history (notwithstanding the interregnum of Alexander of Macedon’s conquest of Persia), was undoubtedly not blemish free. There were occasional aberrations for tolerance and respect of foreign peoples. But overall, the balance sheet remains a worthy one. And this is in no small part the legacy of Cyrus, the father of his nation who set the tone for Iran on the international stage.

Cyrus must have been a remarkable military strategist, his unprecedented conquests suggests he was. His decision to strike out on his own and his vision of expansion led to his consolidation of tribes of both Iranian and non-Iranians, listed by Herodotus as including people from the south-eastern corner of the Caspian Sea as far as the Indian Ocean. Their unification appears to have been achieved on the whole peacefully, and it is thought that the college of seven princes may date from this period. (It is generally agreed by scholars that the ‘college of seven princes’ was an acknowledgement of the seven *Amesha Spentas*, integral to Zarathustra’s teachings). This body formed the royal council of the Persians, in which the king was the first among the seven. Thus,

within the borders of Iran proper, there came a union in which the tribal chiefs took an active share in the formation of the State.

We are agreed that the ancient Iranians were a great martial peoples: expansion of territorial boundaries and the maintenance of vast areas of conquered lands was a central feature of their foreign and military policies. Iran, more specifically, pre-Islamic Iran, was the stage on which Cyrus walked. The Iranian prophet Zarathustra's message would have been in circulation, and the Hakaemenish family, arguably counted some among their own, as followers of this faith. Since warfare, with its inescapable corollary of death and destruction must ultimately remain by definition, in Zoroastrian terms an *ahrimanic* activity, qualitatively distinct from the ethical precepts of Zarathustra's teachings, how then did a monarch of a Zoroastrian land, equate his wars and conquests with the peace and justice of the realm required by his beliefs? Although we do not find much by way of dedicated theories of war in Zoroastrian literature, an examination of the history of pre-Islamic Iran's empire shows that these ancient Iranians have left a legacy of high achievement in their treatment of the vanquished. Once engaged in conflict, there appears to have been a robust frame of ethical reference with relation to the conquered peoples. In this context, we ought perhaps to cast a cursory glance at two contradictory principles: religion and warfare. The modern theory of 'Just War', crafted primarily in the West, points to the moral imperatives underpinning *Jus ad bellum* or why wars are fought, and *Jus in bello* the conduct of war. A glance at Cyrus's career from the standpoint of Just War might be a useful exercise in our evaluation of him not just as monarch, but as a man.

Cyrus set the tone for generations that followed. Without question, he was a man of flesh and blood, and it would be wrong to think of him as saintly. Creating an empire suggests bloodshed on a vast scale. Cyrus became king of Anshan (a province in southern Iran) having successfully incorporated Lydia and defeated its monarch Croesus. The Phrygians, Mysians and other Asiatic tribes then quickly submitted to him; and this was followed by the piecemeal submission of Greek cities. The year 547BC marks the first contact between Persians and Greeks, the year Cyrus defeated Croesus of Lydia. Neither people recognised its fateful character: the Greeks, unaware at this point in time that their international relations would be dominated by the Achaemenid great kings; for the Persians, during the next half century, Greeks on the western boundary would remain a frontier problem, albeit less of a real threat than some historians believe. The surrender of Babylon however, was Cyrus's greatest achievement. What followed is by now well-documented and has become a glorious chapter in the collective memories of all peoples of Iranian descent.

Following the conquest of Babylon, Cyrus returned the gods carried off by Nabu-aid [the defeated ruler of Babylon], not only to their native Babylonian cities, but also the gods of Assyria and Elam, and had their ruined temples rebuilt. Cyrus's encounter with the Jewish exiles in Babylon, and his approach towards them, followed this policy of tolerance and respect of foreign traditions. The 'Cyrus Cylinder' informs us that the surrender of Babylon brought Cyrus into contact with the 'people of Israel' who had been imprisoned in the city. The Persian monarch issued his famous decree for putting an end to the captivity of the Jews and for rebuilding the temple of Jerusalem. Fascinatingly for us, it is the Hebrew Prophet Ezra, who documents the interactions: "...Thus said Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah..." (Ezra i. 1-4) Again, Ezra informs us that the Persian monarch commanded that the 'cost [for the rebuilding of the Jewish

temple] be paid from the royal treasury' (Ezra 6:3-5), establishing a pattern for future Persian monarchs. Palestine periodically came under the control of the Persian Empire, and communities of Jews continued to live throughout these territories for the period of the three Zoroastrian empires. They appeared even, on the evidence of the Hebrew Bible, to have served in the Persian court. It may be of interest for us to note that the Talmud, the commentary of the 'Oral Law' (*Mishna*) was composed not in Palestine but within the Persian Empire during the Arsacid Parthian and Sasanian dynasties. Thus confirming the founding principles for tolerance and acceptance of foreign religions and cultures by successors of Cyrus.

The Persian monarch had established a reputation for just rule over his expanding empire. He made no attempt to impose the Iranian religion on his subjects, but rather, encouraged them to continue to live according to their traditions. His elevation in the Jewish texts: "This is what Jehovah has said to his anointed one, to Cyrus whose right hand I have taken hold of to subdue before him nations..." (Isaiah 45.1), speaks to the statesmanlike conduct of *Jus in bello* – the conduct of war – established by the founding father of the Persian empire and evolved into the blueprint of early Iranian imperial theory. Here was a man who demanded of his victorious troops that: "I ordered that none of the houses of the people be ruined. I ordered that none of the citizens should be put to death." (Translation of the text on the Cyrus Cylinder, transl. Irving Finkel, The British Museum, London). His revolutionary behaviour in the realm of war and conquest was thus to become the ideal to which later Zoroastrian monarchs aspired.

The overall record of the Achaemenid monarchs' treatment of the vanquished as recorded by foreign observers stands the scrutiny of close examination. Herodotus attests that the Persians were generous in their treatment of conquered peoples, and they would show honour to an enemy who had fought valiantly (Herod. 6:30, 7:81, 238). The sons of rebel chiefs were treated with great consideration, occasionally being permitted to rule over their father's territories (Herod. 3:13). At times, the conquered king spent the remainder of his life at the Persian court as an honoured guest of the king (Herod. 1:130, 153, 207, 3:36). The wisdom of Cyrus is also attested by Aeschylus, who notes that the King had a "temperate soul". Plato noted that under Cyrus' rule, the empire was bestowed with "a spirit of freedom, friendship and community." Even Alexander, who conquered and destroyed the Achaemenid Empire, paid homage to Cyrus at his tomb at Pasargadae. Post-Alexandrian sources, such as Diodorus Siculus report Cyrus as having been "considerate and humane in his treatment of his subjects." (Book 9, 22-24)

We see therefore, that espousal of religious freedom for the conquered peoples appears to have been well established by the Achaemenid dynasty; as monarchs and their satraps were prepared to promote their subjects through endowments so long as the foreign divinities were not antithetical to the interests of the empire. Naturally, these places of worship were expected to pay taxes to the Persian exchequer, and acknowledge Persian suzerainty. Wieshöfer argues that "this principle of religious policy was actually observed by all Persian kings." (Joseph Wieshöfer, *Ancient Persia*, London, I B Tauris 2001, pp. 57-8). The underlying reason for this policy would have been an appreciation by the king and his advisers that respect of foreign beliefs and customs would help build social cohesion, vital to the establishment of a new empire. However, before we get carried away with visions of a paradise on earth for the conquered peoples, it is as well to remember that the Achaemenid record was not without blemish. There were instances of harsh treatment of those considered dangerous enemies of the state. Crucifixion, or the mutilation of limbs were punishments

inflicted upon rebel chiefs. Those inhabitants who acted treacherously against the Persian army were on occasion, put to the sword (Herod. 3:147, 159, 8:53), or sold as slaves.

The somewhat perplexing aspect of Herodotus, known as the 'father of history', who wrote his *magnum opus* almost 100 years after Cyrus's death, is that although he was not shy in painting Cyrus in rather negative terms – he tells us that the monarch could be hot-tempered and irascible – yet, this Greek historian appears to have been fascinated by the king's personality. Indeed, a vast lexicon of myths has, over the centuries, attached itself, to Cyrus the man and Cyrus the monarch. As with all myths, there is often a kernel of truth hidden in its depth. Herodotus relates Cyrus's response to his people, who asked that now that they had extended their power and were the dominant peoples of a vast empire, they be permitted to leave their 'rough homeland' for the 'rich countries' now in their possession. The king replied:

...that they might act upon it if they pleased, but added the warning that, if they did so, they must prepare themselves to rule no longer, but to be ruled by others. 'Soft countries', he said, 'breed soft men. It is not the property of any one soil to produce fine fruits and good soldiers too.'
(Wieshöfer, p. 81)

This report would suggest Cyrus's commitment to stiffening the resolve of his peoples and his long-term goal of preparing his nation to 'rule' over others.

I have touched upon Zoroastrian monarchs and Zoroastrian ethics in our discussion. There is however, an ongoing debate as to whether Cyrus was in fact a Zoroastrian. There are those who argue against and point to the fact that Cyrus made no mention of Zarathustra or Ahura Mazda; and that his corpse was embalmed and buried in a tomb; while he paid homage to the Babylonian god Marduk, and indeed, acknowledged and honoured the gods of the different religions of the countries he had conquered. An argument as to the monarch's Zoroastrian pedigree, is put forward by those who would point to the stone 'altars' at Pasargadae; that Cyrus named his daughter 'Atossa' which is the Persian for Hutaosa, the name of King Vishtaspa's Queen, i.e. a Zoroastrian name; and that according to Xenophon's *Cyropedia*, Cyrus 'followed the instruction of the Magi'. Professor Stronach [David Stronach, *Pasargadae*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979] points to the tomb reliefs in Pasargadae, Cyrus's winter capital near modern Shiraz. The tomb reliefs suggest that a sacred fire or its embers may have been carried in a brazier, as still occurs in contemporary practice in Iran and India, to the northern limestone plinth in the vicinity of the tomb. The king or a magus [*mobed*] would have ascended to the top of the southern plinth, faced the altar with its fire, and performed devotions. The open air complex at Pasargadae thus functioned as an *atesgah* or "place/space of the fire", i.e. a Zoroastrian fire precinct. Professor Choksy concurs with this opinion [Jamsheed Choksy, "Reassessing the Material Contexts of Ritual Fires in Ancient Iran", *Iranica Antiqua* 42 (2007), pp. 229-269].

In spite of the on-going discussion as to Cyrus's Zoroastrianism, when evaluating the record of a monarch, rather than attempting to read his thoughts and imagine the level of spirituality he may or may not have reached, the more pertinent question is the political function of religion. In this sense, there appears to be a degree of unanimity amongst experts that Cyrus was an enthusiastic imperialist, but a less keen evangelist! From where we stand today, that is no bad thing.

Perhaps, given the immense distance in time, it may be ultimately impossible for us today to ascertain the religious beliefs of Cyrus. Ought we then, to judge him by his actions? In an age when what we today would refer to as humanist principles were generally unknown, it appears that this Persian monarch pursued a policy of religious pluralism. Ghrishman (p.133) suggests that few kings have left behind so noble a reputation as that which attaches to the memory of Cyrus. He remains, in the popular mind, a remarkable leader of men, his reputation for generosity and benevolence is reinforced by the somewhat revolutionary policy of not compelling conquered countries to cast aside their religions and cultures and adopt the religion and culture of their Iranian masters; and by honouring the gods of the lands he conquered, Cyrus represented himself as the legitimate successor of the native rulers. This, I would suggest, is the mark of a genius who grasped strategy and its role in empire building.

The career of Cyrus can be studied essentially as that of a great military strategist, a revolutionary figure in relation to the vanquished, and as the first great Iranian who reshaped his nation into an actor on the global stage. He would have been aware that the Persians – newly arrived on the international stage – had set about conquering nations that pre-dated his own. We can make an educated guess that he had set himself the goal of creating the greatest empire yet known to history, and began by laying the foundations for governance of this wide-ranging territory. The conquered states were replaced by formal provinces, each ruled by a governor with full staff of subordinates, all of which kept in close touch with central power. During the reign of Cyrus, the empire was divided into 20 satrapies, each ruled by a satrap *Khshathrapavan* (protector of the kingdom), who were responsible for civil administration and collection of levies.

Thus, Cyrus laid the groundwork for his great enterprise: the elevation of Iran in the firmament of nations. This man of flesh and blood appears to have been all too human: a military strategist whose clear-sighted vision and iron determination is attested to in various sources, and who, we are told, could be irascible and hot-tempered. There is a vignette where Plutarch describes a royal initiation in his work, 'Life of Artaxerxes II': ...Into this sanctuary the candidate for initiation must pass, and after laying aside his own proper robe, must put on that which Cyrus the Elder used to wear before he became king; then he must eat of a cake of figs, chew some terebinth, and drink a cup of sour milk.' Thus nearly 125 years after the death of Cyrus, kings of his dynasty 'put on' his robe at their coronation.

Cyrus himself had prepared his last resting place at Pasargadae. Like the fire temple, it rested on a platform, 48x44 feet at the base, and ascending in six uneven steps to a total of 17 feet. On the seventh step was placed the tomb proper. It bore a brief royal inscription: "Here I lie, Cyrus, king of kings." Almost exactly 200 years later, when Alexander of Macedon defeated the last Achaemenid king (Darius III), the Macedonian general Aristobulus, visiting Cyrus's tomb expanded the brief epitaph to fit Greek ideas as to what would be appropriate for a mighty ruler: "O man, I am Cyrus, who acquired the empire for the Persians and was king of Persia; grudge me not therefore my monument." (Olmstead, p. 65, quoting Strabo) How much more modest was Cyrus' initial inscription.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that Cyrus the Persian was among the greatest men who lived. He made his reputation as a conqueror and sagacious ruler. What would he have made of our

dysfunctional world, were he to reappear today? We accept that Persian monarchs did not articulate the theory of Just War as currently propounded. However, following the example set by Cyrus, they appear, in most instances to have weighed up whether or not the next confrontation was a just cause; while for the most part, demonstrating a level of tolerance for the vanquished. Further back, Zarathustra himself, made the choice between good and evil the cornerstone of his teachings. Could it be that subliminally, Cyrus, grandson of the Median king Astyages, son of Cambyses the Achaemenid, and the true founder of the Achaemenid dynasty, espoused a Zoroastrian mind-set? It is a tantalising prospect.