

# Cambyses

Cambyses, son of Cyrus - the second Achaemenid 530 - 522 BC

Cyrus was succeeded by his son, Cambyses. There are no Persian sources for his reign: we have to rely almost entirely on Herodotus again, although there are some Egyptian records.

## Conquest of Egypt

When Cyrus died, it was always going to be difficult for his successor to control so vast a territory. But the biggest problem facing Cambyses was Egypt. Egypt felt threatened by the Persian advance to the Mediterranean. To make matters worse the Phoenicians, who had previously provided the navy for the Egyptians, defected to the Persian side.

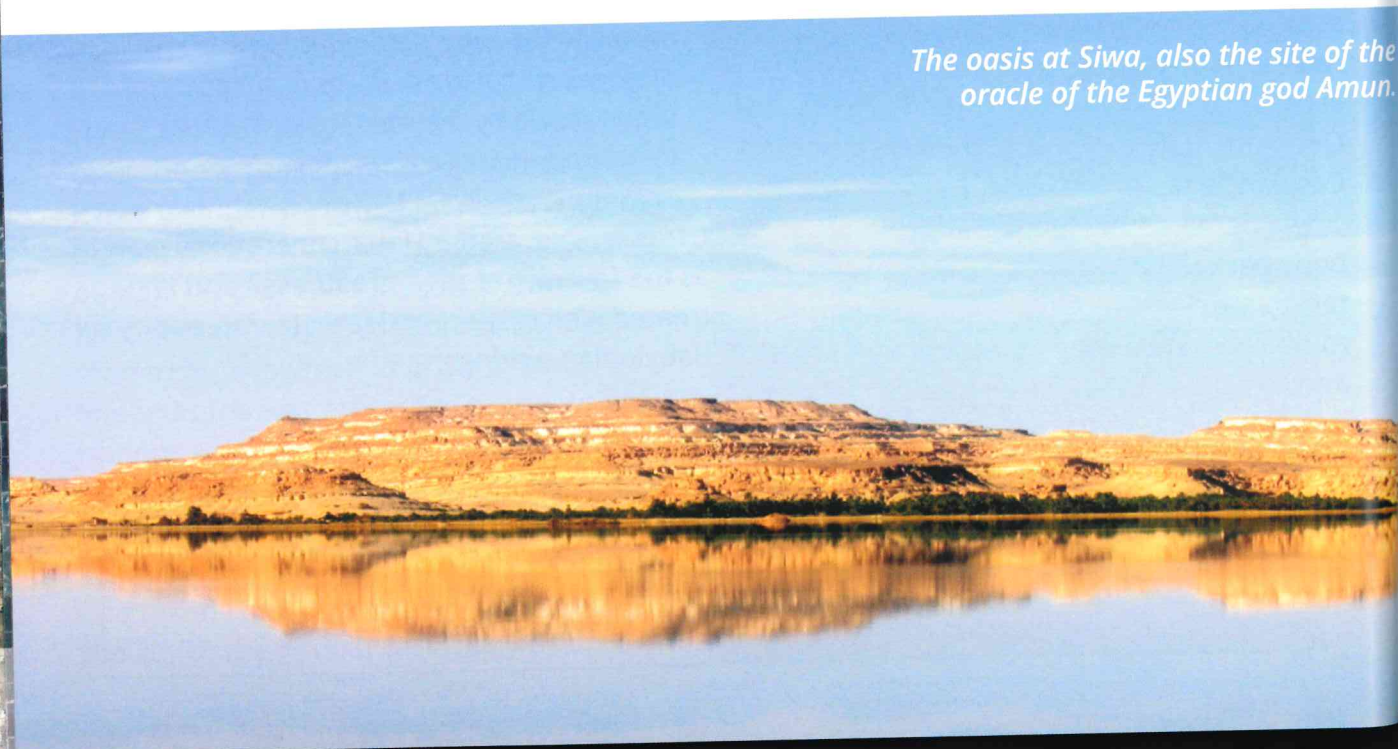
First, here is an Egyptian account of Cambyses' conquest. (It's part of a hieroglyphic inscription on a statue of an Egyptian doctor, at the court of the Pharaoh.)

*The Great Chief of all foreign lands, Cambyses, came to Egypt. He gained the mastery of this land in its entirety. His majesty assigned to me the office of chief physician. He made me live at his side as a friend and administrator of the palace. I caused his majesty to recognise the greatness of ... the temple of Neith-the-Great, the mother who bore Re ... and of all the gods and goddesses.*

*His Majesty commanded the expulsion of all the foreigners who dwelled in the temple of Neith, to demolish all their houses and all their unclean things that were in the temple.*

Cambyses, apparently, adopted the Egyptian titles, and was sympathetic to Egyptian religion. As you'd expect by now, though, the Greek story is far more exciting. Cambyses in Hérodoteus is mad, cruel and disrespectful of everything Egyptian.

*The oasis at Siwa, also the site of the oracle of the Egyptian god Amun.*



## The Greek version

Instead of describing the battle, Herodotus seems more interested in telling us that it rained in Thebes ('which had never happened before, or afterwards up to my own time') and how the dead Egyptians had thicker skulls than the Persians, because they shaved their heads which were therefore strengthened by exposure to sunlight! All he adds about the fighting is:

*When the Egyptians were routed in battle, they panicked and ran away in disorder...*

He then continues, telling us how Cambyses first humiliated the Pharaoh, and then proceeded to have his father's body removed from its tomb ...

*He ordered the corpse to be whipped, have its hair pulled out, be stabbed and violated in every possible way. His men eventually became exhausted by these tasks, as the corpse, being embalmed, would not fall apart. So Cambyses ordered them to burn it, which was an outrage against religion, as the Persians believe fire is a god.*

Cambyses, having added Egypt to Persian territory, wanted more. However, the Ethiopian campaign was apparently a desperate failure:

*They ran out of food, and ate the baggage animals until they were all gone too ... his men survived for a while by eating grass, but when they reached the desert sand ... they chose one man by lot out of every ten, and ate them ...*

## Activities

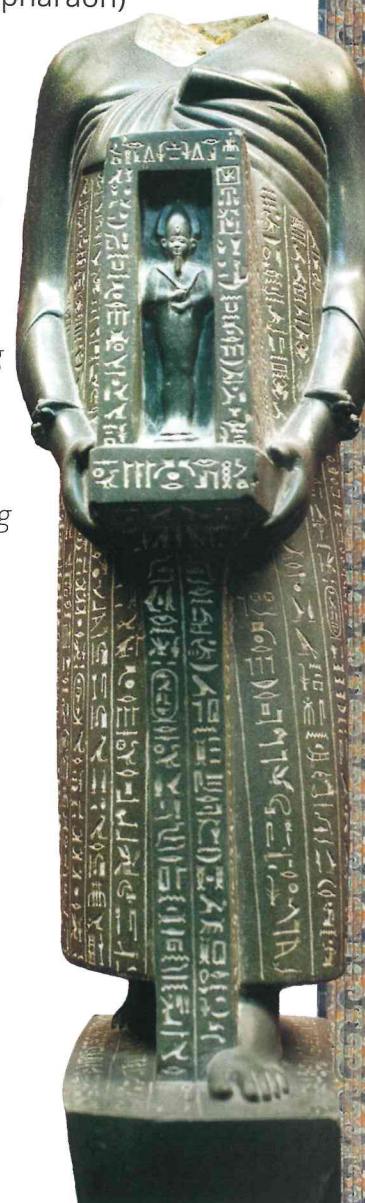
1. Imagine you are a member of Cambyses' army, either going south to Ethiopia or west into the desert. Write an account of your experiences.
2. Research Phoenicia and the Phoenicians.

Meanwhile his force of 50,000 men sent to destroy the oracle at Amun (it had refused to recognise him as pharaoh) suffered an even worse fate ...

*They travelled with guides and reached the city of Oasis (Siwa), a seven-day journey across the sand. Once they left Oasis, they marched across the desert. They stopped somewhere along the way, and while they were making breakfast a wind of extraordinary power started blowing from the south, burying them in sand so that the entire army disappeared.*

Herodotus goes on to produce more extreme examples of Cambyses' madness – including the murder of members of his own family, and other Persians.

But the basic fact is clear: Cambyses, carrying out the plan of his father Cyrus, conquered Egypt and added it to the territory the Persians controlled.



*Udjnahorresnet (the Egyptian doctor) with hieroglyphic inscription.*

## Questions

1. Was Cambyses mad? Give four reasons for your answer.
2. In 2009, Italian archaeologists believed they had discovered weapons belonging to Cambyses' lost army. Would this change your view of Cambyses?
3. Why was Egypt important to the Persians?