

Cyrus

Cyrus the Great (Kurash) ruled from about 558 BC to 530 BC.

The founding of the Persian Empire

Let Cyrus introduce himself:

I, Cyrus, king of the universe, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters, son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, great king, king of Anshan...

This is part of the inscription on the 'Cyrus Cylinder', which we'll see more of later.

Apart from what Cyrus tells us, we know nothing at all about his ancestors. The royal family that ruled Persia is often called the Achaemenids, which means 'the descendants of Achaemenes'. Cyrus never mentions Achaemenes: he appears in the inscriptions set up by Darius, as an ancestor of them both, and as the father of Teispes.

Cyrus' cylinder celebrates his capture of Babylon in 539 BC, the climax of his reign. But before he could take on the mighty Babylonians, the super-power of their day,



The world's oldest coin? Coin of Croesus, from Lydia.

Cyrus had to deal with some other peoples...

First: the Medes

The Medes were close relatives of the Persians. A Babylonian chronicle gives us the basic facts:

Astyages [king of the Medes] mustered his army and marched against Cyrus, king of Anshan. The army rebelled against Astyages and took him prisoner. They handed him over to Cyrus. Cyrus marched to Ecbatana, the royal city. The silver, gold and other goods which he carried off, he took back to Anshan.

That's all. We have to guess why Astyages attacked Cyrus, and why his army turned against him. Herodotus has a more exciting account and tells us that the Persians were ruled by the Medes, and that Cyrus wanted to break free.

Second: the Lydians 547 BC

Croesus, king of Lydia, was Astyages' brother-in-law. Croesus' kingdom was immensely wealthy and was separated from the Medes by the river Halys. Croesus' capital was also a long way to the west, at Sardis.

Questions & activity

1. What advantages would Cyrus have gained from defeating Croesus?
2. What are the advantages of a 'money-based economy'? Are there any disadvantages?
2. Draw a family tree for Cyrus. His mother, Mandane, was the daughter of Astyages.

Croesus was alarmed at Cyrus' easy conquest of the Medes, so he prepared to challenge Cyrus. However, Cyrus appeared to ignore Croesus. Croesus waited until winter and finally returned to Sardis. But Cyrus had two surprises for Croesus. First, despite it being winter he still attacked. His second surprise was ... camels! Their smell spooked Croesus' horses: he retreated into his capital city, knowing it was impregnable. Except it wasn't. A lucky break gave Cyrus victory: a defender lost his helmet and came scrambling down to retrieve it, accidentally showing Cyrus the way up into the city.

Cyrus captured Sardis and was overwhelmed to see the lifestyle that Croesus had enjoyed. No doubt Cyrus realised how comparatively little in the way of luxury he had enjoyed so far. In time, the Persians were to become proverbial for their luxurious lifestyle: this was something that only began after the conquest of Lydia.

Sardis became Cyrus' western capital and he took many of its craftsmen (Greeks and Lydians) back to Persia to work on his own new palace at Pasargadae.

An important innovation that was borrowed from Lydia was the idea of coinage, which had probably been invented by the Lydians' Greek neighbours around 600 BC. Lydia was quick to seize on the advantages of a money-based economy. Coined money was something entirely new in the ancient world, and was one of the things that was to help hold the Persian empire together: the idea of a single currency throughout the world was something developed later by Darius, as we shall see.

Research

Why was Cyrus so confident he was going to win when he attacked Croesus?

