



## 87 CYRUS THE GREAT

c. 590 B.C.- 529 B.C.

Cyrus the Great was the founder of the Persian Empire. Starting as a subordinate ruler in southwest Iran, he overthrew—by a remarkable series of victories—three great empires (those of the Medes, Lydians, and Babylonians), and united most of the ancient Middle East into a single state stretching from India to the Mediterranean Sea.

Cyrus (Kurush in the original Persian) was born about 590 B.C., in the province of Persis (now Fars), in southwest Iran. The area was at that time a province in the empire of the Medes. Cyrus was descended from a line of local chiefs who were vassals of the king of the Medes.

Later tradition created an interesting legend concerning

Cyrus, somewhat reminiscent of the Greek legend of King Oedipus. According to this legend, Cyrus was the grandson of Astyages, king of the Medes. Before Cyrus's birth, Astyages had a dream that his grandson would someday overthrow him. The king ordered that the infant be killed promptly after his birth. However, the official entrusted with the job of killing the infant had no heart for such a bloody deed, and instead handed him over to a shepherd and his wife with instructions that they put the child to death. But they, too, were unwilling to kill the boy, and instead reared him as their own. Ultimately, when the child grew up, he indeed caused the king's downfall.

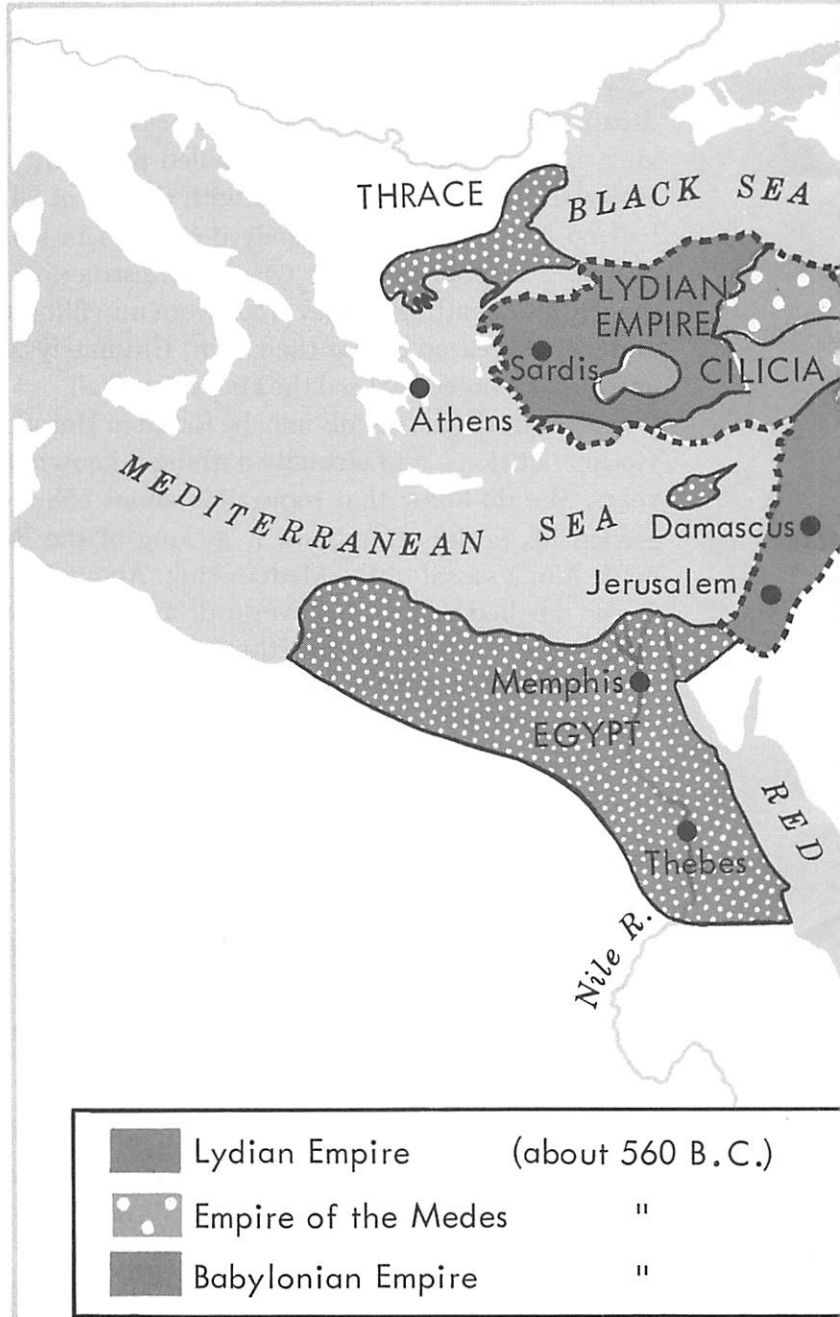
This story (the details may be found in Herodotus) seems obviously fictitious, and virtually nothing is known of Cyrus's early years. We do know that some time about 558 B.C., Cyrus succeeded his father, Cambyses I, as king of the Persians, which made him a vassal of the Median king. About 553 B.C., however, Cyrus rebelled against his overlord, and after a war lasting for three years, succeeded in overthrowing him.

The Medes and the Persians were very closely related, both in origins and in language. Since Cyrus retained most of the laws of the Medes and much of their administrative procedure as well, his victory over the Medes was more like a change of dynasty than a foreign conquest.

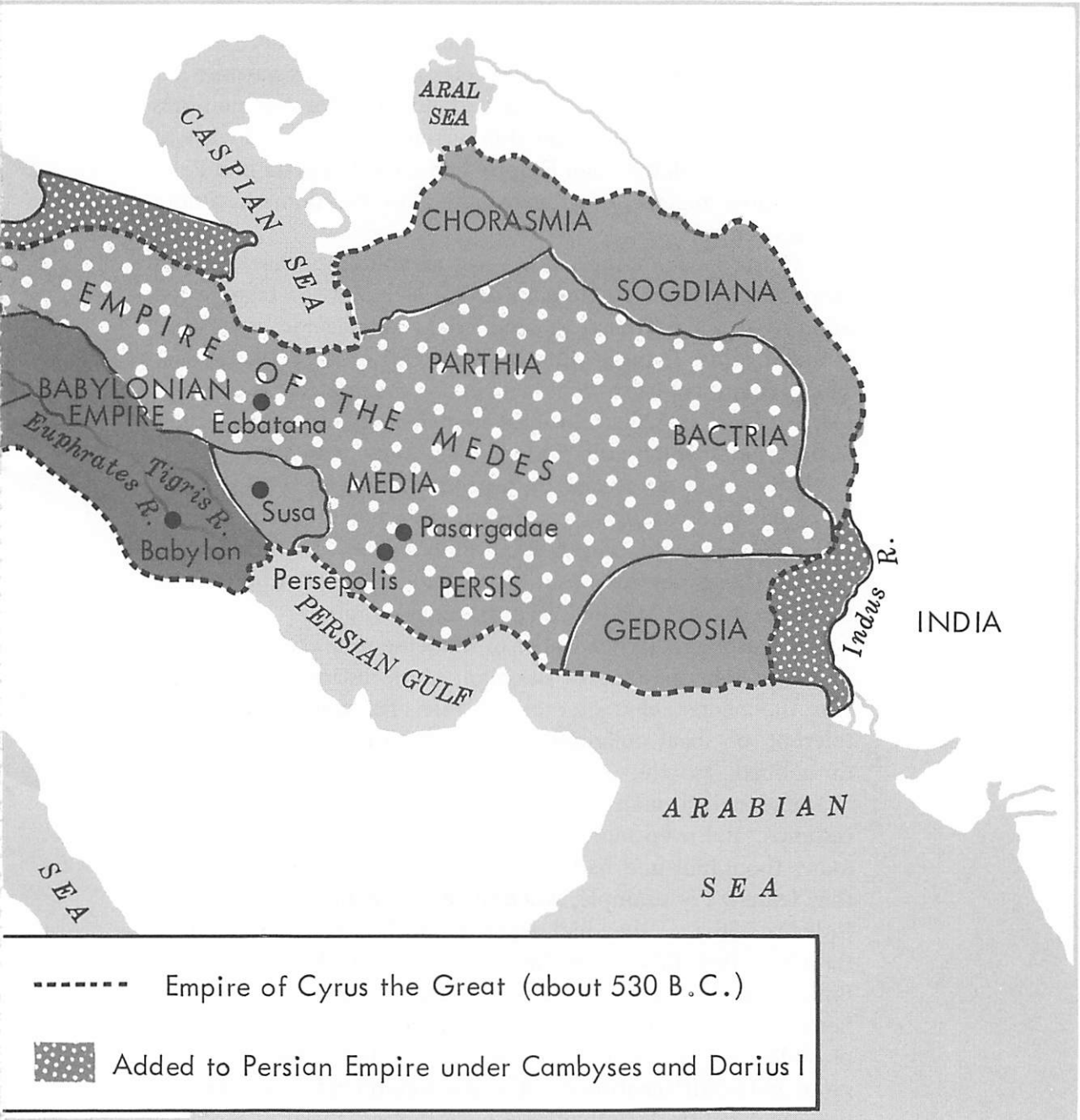
Cyrus, though, soon showed that he desired foreign conquest also. His first target was the Lydian Empire in Asia Minor, ruled by King Croesus, a man of legendary wealth. Cyrus's iron proved more than a match for Croesus's gold, and by 546 B.C., Cyrus had conquered the Lydian Empire and made Croesus his prisoner.

Cyrus then turned his attention to the east, and in a series of campaigns, subdued all of eastern Iran and incorporated it into his empire. By 540 B.C., the Persian Empire extended as far east as the Indus river in India and the Jaxartes (modern-day Syr Darya) in Central Asia.

With his rear protected, Cyrus could now concentrate on the richest prize of all, the wealthy Babylonian Empire, centered



*Cyrus the Great and the Persian Empire.*



in Mesopotamia but ruling the entire Fertile Crescent of the ancient Middle East. Unlike Cyrus, the Babylonian ruler Nabonidus was not popular with his subjects. When Cyrus's armies advanced, the Babylonian troops had no taste for the pointless struggle, and in 539 B.C., Babylon surrendered to Cyrus without a fight. As the Babylonian Empire had included Syria and Palestine, those regions, too, were added to the domains under Cyrus's control.

Cyrus spent the next few years consolidating his rule and reorganizing the enormous empire that he had won. Then he led an army to the northeast to conquer the Massagetae, who were nomadic tribes living in Central Asia, east of the Caspian Sea. The Persians were victorious in an early skirmish. But in a second battle, fought in 529 B.C., they were defeated, and Cyrus—ruler of the greatest empire the world had yet seen—was slain.

Cyrus was succeeded by his son, Cambyses II. Cambyses defeated the Massagetae in a return engagement, recovered his father's body, and buried it at Pasargadae, the old Persian capital. Cambyses then went on to conquer Egypt, thus uniting the entire ancient Middle East into a single empire.

Cyrus was clearly a leader of immense military ability. But that was only one facet of the man. More distinctive, perhaps, was the benign character of his rule. He was exceptionally tolerant of local religions and local customs, and he was disinclined to the extreme brutality and cruelty which characterized so many other conquerors. The Babylonians, for instance, and even more notably the Assyrians, had massacred many thousands and had exiled whole peoples whose rebellion they feared. For example, when the Babylonians had conquered Judea in 586 B.C., they had deported much of the population to Babylon. But fifty years later, after Cyrus had conquered Babylonia, he gave the Jews permission to return to their homeland. Were it not for Cyrus, therefore, it seems at least possible that the Jewish people would have died out as a separate group in the fifth century B.C. Cyrus's decision in this matter may have had political motivations; nevertheless, there seems little

doubt that he was a remarkably humane ruler for his time. Even the Greeks, who for a long period considered the Persian Empire to be the chief threat to their own independence, never ceased to regard Cyrus as a thoroughly admirable ruler.

So well had Cyrus done his work, that even after his death the Persian Empire continued to expand. It endured, in fact, for about two hundred years, until its conquest by Alexander the Great. For most of those two centuries, the lands ruled by Persia enjoyed internal peace and prosperity.

Alexander's conquest did not mark the permanent end of the Persian Empire. After Alexander's death, one of his generals, Seleucus I Nicator, gained control of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iran, thereby establishing the Seleucid Empire. However, foreign control over Iran did not last very long. In the middle of the third century B.C., there was a rebellion against Seleucid rule, led by Arsaces I, who claimed to be descended from the Achaemenids (the dynasty of Cyrus). The kingdom founded by Arsaces— known as the Parthian Empire—eventually gained control over Iran and Mesopotamia. In 224 A.D., the Arsacid rulers were replaced by a new Persian dynasty, the Sassanids, who likewise claimed descent from the Achaemenids, and whose empire endured for over four centuries.

The career of Cyrus the Great represents one of the major turning points in world history. Civilization had first arisen in Sumeria, somewhat before 3000 B.C. For over twenty-five centuries, the Sumerians and the various Semitic peoples who succeeded them (such as the Akkadians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians) had been at the very center of civilization. For all that time, Mesopotamia had been the richest and most culturally advanced region of the world (with the exception of Egypt, which was roughly on the same level). But Cyrus's career—which, incidentally, marks roughly the mid-point of recorded history—brought that chapter of world history to an end. From then on, neither Mesopotamia nor Egypt was the center of the civilized world, either politically or culturally.

Furthermore, the Semitic peoples—who made up the bulk of the population of the Fertile Crescent—were not to regain their independence for many centuries to come. After the Persians (an Indo-European people), were to come the Macedonians and the Greeks, followed by a long succession of Parthian, Roman, and Sassanid rulers, all of whom were Indo-Europeans. It was not until the Moslem conquests of the seventh century—almost twelve centuries after Cyrus the Great—that the Fertile Crescent was again controlled by Semitic peoples.

Cyrus is significant not merely because he won a lot of battles and conquered a lot of territory. Of greater importance is the fact that the empire he established permanently altered the political structure of the ancient world.

The Persian Empire, despite its considerable territorial extent and duration, did not have nearly as great an impact on history as did such longer-lived empires as the Roman, British, or Chinese empires. But in estimating Cyrus's influence, one should keep in mind that what he accomplished would probably never have occurred without him. In 620 B.C. (a generation before Cyrus was born), no one would have suspected that within a century the entire ancient world would be under the rule of a previously obscure tribe from southwest Iran. Even in retrospect, it does not appear that the rise of the Persian Empire was one of those historical events which, because of preexisting social or economic factors, was bound to happen sooner or later. Thus, Cyrus was one of those rare men who have actually altered the course of history.

*The tomb of Cyrus the Great at Pasargadae.*

