

66 A GREEK HISTORY,
A PERSIAN KING'S
INSCRIPTION, AND
THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

OF CAMELS, KINGS, AND CONQUERORS

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

Croesus ruled the land of Lydia, far to the north and west of Mesopotamia. When the Persian army under King Cyrus attacked Lydia, Croesus was confident that his troops would defeat them. But he was wrong—almost dead wrong! One problem was that the Persians rode camels into battle, and their camels terrified the Lydians' horses. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote that the Lydians were losing badly, and an ordinary Persian soldier almost killed Croesus, not realizing that he was the king.

Croesus saw him coming; but because in his misery he did not care if he lived or died, he made no effort to defend himself. But [his] mute son, seeing the danger, was so terrified . . . that he broke into speech, and cried: "Do not kill Croesus, fellow!" Those were the first words he ever uttered—and he kept the power of speech for the rest of his life.

Croesus was taken to King Cyrus, who commanded that the enemy king be burned alive. Attendants prepared the firewood, placed Croesus on the top, and lit the edges of the woodpile. The flames were coming dangerously near, but Croesus prayed to the gods for rescue. Herodotus wrote: "It was a clear and windless day; but suddenly in answer to Croesus's prayer, clouds gathered and a storm broke with such violent rain that the flames were put out." According to Herodotus, these two miracles convinced Cyrus that the gods wanted Croesus to live. The Persian king appointed Croesus as one of his trusted advisers. That was Herodotus's story, anyway, but he loved to tell tall tales. There are no accounts by the Lydians or the Persians to back them up.

Whether or not this story is true, we know that Croesus

and Cyrus were real kings. From 560 to 547 BCE, Croesus ruled the kingdom of Lydia, a beautiful land near the Mediterranean, with green hills and orchards, threaded through with small rivers and streams.

Cyrus's kingdom centered in what is now Iran, on a high plateau in the Zagros Mountains, almost two thousand miles from Croesus's land. In 550 BCE, in the ninth year of his reign, Cyrus conquered a neighboring people known as the Medes, whose kingdom stretched from Anatolia through Assyria to the Oxus River. So, when Cyrus overcame the Medes, he became the ruler of a huge empire, with Lydia just beyond its western border.

Cyrus was determined to expand his empire. His triumph over Croesus was his second



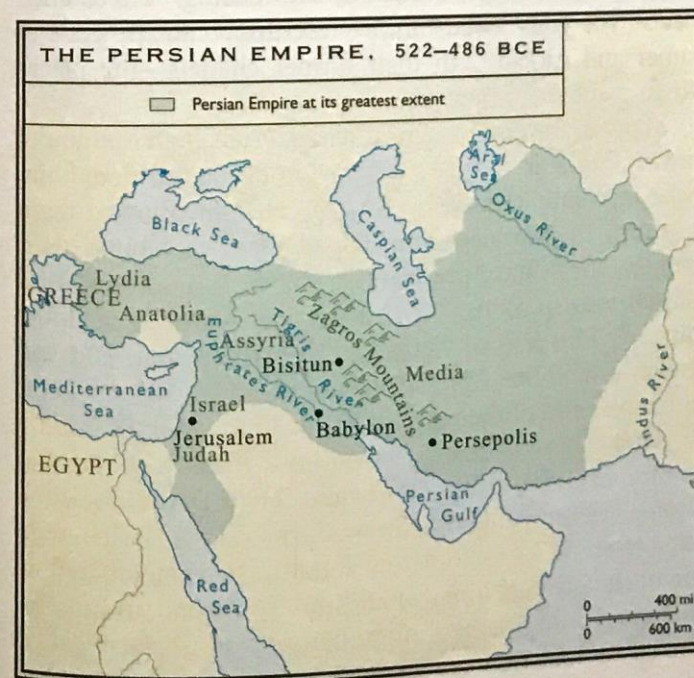
King Croesus sits above the woodpile as the conquering king's servant leans to light the flames. The Greeks loved to paint scenes from history, such as this one—the moment just before Croesus was rescued.

66 Herodotus, *Histories*, 5th century BCE



LATER IN ITALY...

About 350 years after Cyrus's camels frightened the Lydians' horses, another general staged a similar victory. This later general was the North African leader Hannibal, whose war elephants—with their trunks painted red—frightened the Roman horses and helped Hannibal to defeat the most powerful army of his day.



major victory, and others soon followed. Nabonidus, the unpopular king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, was another target of Cyrus's ambition. Cyrus had a royal inscription carved on a barrel-shaped tablet to celebrate his easy victory over Babylon. In the inscription, he described himself in much the same way that Mesopotamian kings had done ever since the earliest Sumerian city-states, almost 2,500 years earlier:

I am Cyrus, king of the world, . . . rightful king . . . of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four rims (of the earth), . . . king of Anshan [Persia] . . . of a family (that) always ruled; whose reign Bel [Marduk] . . . love(s).

Even though he conquered an empire, Cyrus, like Hammurabi, boasted in the same inscription: "I did not allow anybody to terrorize any place in the country of Sumer and Akkad. I aimed for peace in Babylon and in all [Marduk's] other cities." He described his generosity to other cities: "I brought relief to their broken-down housing." He claimed that all the gods loved him: "I resettled . . . all the gods of Sumer and Akkad . . . in their former chapels—the places which make them happy."

Many in the empire agreed with Cyrus's high opinion of himself. Some of the Jews in Babylon even considered him to be especially chosen by God, because he allowed them to return to Jerusalem and helped them to rebuild their temple. One biblical prophet, Isaiah, wrote as though God himself was speaking: "I am the Lord, who has made all things . . . who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundation be laid.'"

After Cyrus's death, two kings ruled the Persian Empire, each for a very short time. Then Darius took the throne. (He probably overthrew Cyrus's son.) Darius, who ruled from 522 to 486 BCE, wanted to be remembered as one of the greatest kings of all time. So he had an inscription carved high on a mountainside at a place called Bisitun to celebrate the glories of his reign. An image of

66 "Cyrus Cylinder," inscription, around 539 BCE

66 Isaiah, Hebrew Bible

Darius himself topped the inscription, which was carved in three languages. The king commanded that the stone around the inscription should be smooth and polished so that no one could climb up and deface his name or erase the record of his accomplishments. And it worked—the inscription still proclaims Darius's achievements, just as he hoped it would.

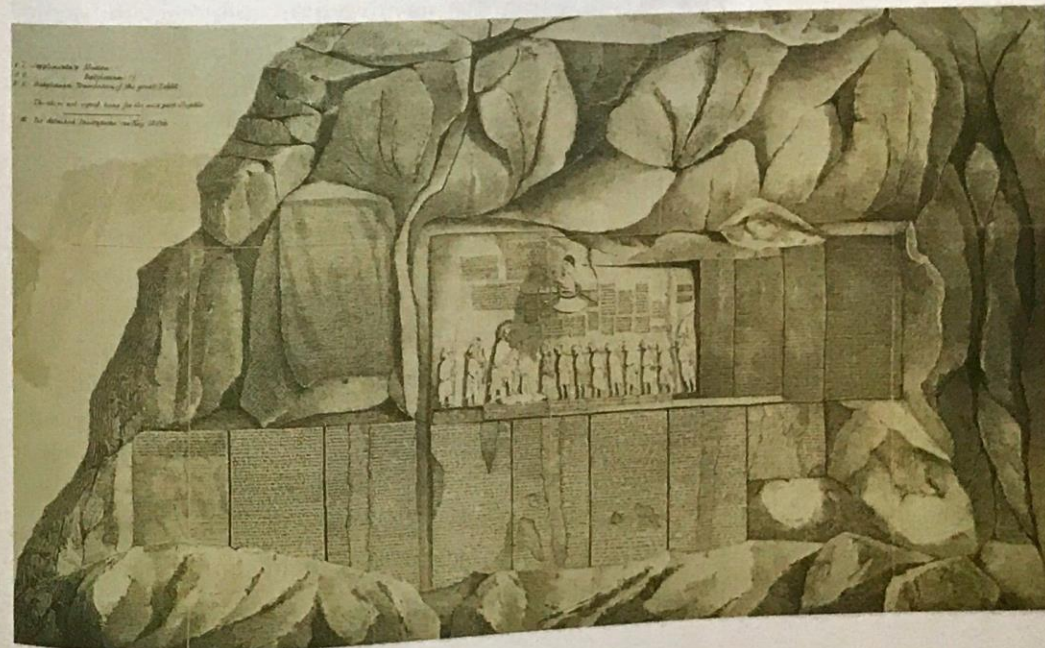
What Darius couldn't have known is that his mountain-side inscription would become the key that opened the languages of his day. He wrote the same message in Persian, Akkadian, and Elamite—the language spoken in Elam, Mesopotamia's neighbor and long-time enemy. Because all three of these languages were written in cuneiform scripts, scholars have used Darius's inscription to decipher these ancient languages.

Darius's inscriptions show that he worshiped the god Ahura Mazda. The king gave Ahura Mazda credit for all his military victories and praised him as the creator of the universe and the god of justice, goodness, and virtue. Darius seems to have believed that the gods of other peoples were just different names for Ahura Mazda. The Babylonians

AS RICH AS CROESUS

The Greeks described Lydia, their neighbor to the east across the Aegean Sea, as a tremendously rich country and its king Croesus as wealthy beyond belief. In fact, the burial mounds of the Lydian kings were the largest and among the wealthiest in Anatolia.

A victorious King Darius speaks to his captured enemies beneath the image of the god Ahura Mazda. Workers carved this scene and its inscription high up on a rock face at Bisitun.



MAPPING HEAVEN

The Zoroastrians of Persia believed in a peaceful, heavenly existence after death for those who had lived good lives. This was unusual among Near Eastern peoples at this time. The Egyptians were the only others who believed in such a heaven. They even made maps showing where its rivers and towns were located.

might worship Marduk, for instance, or the Greeks might worship Zeus, but they were all actually worshiping Ahura Mazda. The Persian kings never forced their subjects to change their religion—everyone was worshiping one god anyway, just using different names for him.

An influential Persian teacher named Zoroaster, who had lived before the reigns of Cyrus and Darius (it's unclear exactly when), preached about Ahura Mazda. Zoroaster taught that this god constantly fought against a demon called The Lie. He explained that each person was responsible to choose good over evil and that all of history was a tale of human beings acting out the struggle between Ahura Mazda and The Lie. Zoroastrians tried to live good lives in order to please Ahura Mazda. They believed that eventually Ahura Mazda would win out over The Lie.

Darius's inscriptions never mention Zoroaster's name, but his beliefs mirror the prophet's teachings. Darius wanted to be a good ruler, but he also longed to be a glorious one. His capital city at Persepolis set a new standard for grandeur. Many of the buildings and sculptures can still be seen there today, towering over the surrounding plateau in what is now Iran. Darius brought in architects and sculptors from many regions to create the art for his capital. He had images of people from all the different parts of his empire carved onto the walls, in endless processions, bringing tribute to him.

During Darius's reign, the Persian Empire became the biggest the world had ever known. It stretched from South Asia all the way to western Anatolia and into Egypt. Darius divided his empire into 20 provinces and appointed a governor, known as a **satrap**, to handle local business, maintain justice, and keep peace in each province. But despite his ambition and his many victories, Darius met a stinging defeat in 490 BCE when the Greeks crushed the army he had sent to conquer them. Greece was just a collection of independent city-states. It was tiny, compared to the great, unified Persian Empire. Victory over them should have been a cinch, but it wasn't.

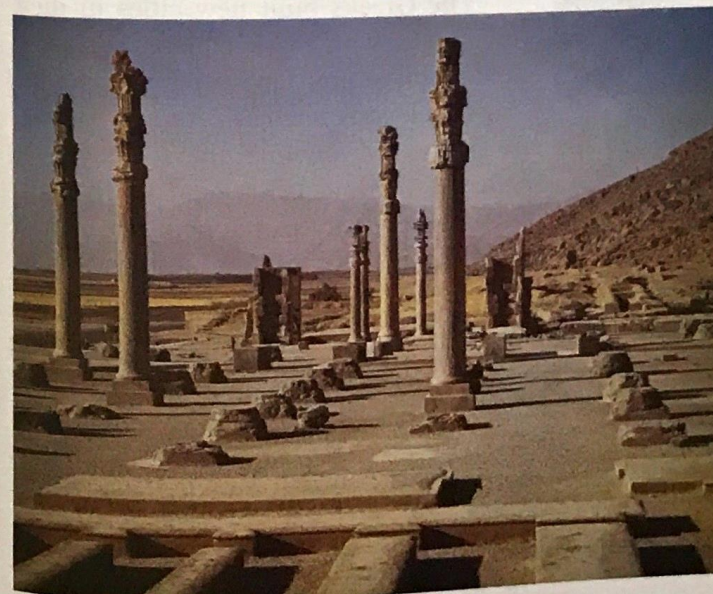
Ten years later, Darius's son Xerxes tried to avenge

“Satrap” comes from the Old Persian word *shathrapavan*, which means “protector of the land.”

Persia's shameful defeat and bring Greece into the Persian Empire. But even though the Persian army was huge, the Greeks won again. The Greeks saw this victory as so earth-shaking that Herodotus wrote the very first history book to celebrate the events of this war and the victory of the heroic Greeks over the mighty Persians.

Although Mesopotamia was now a province, not an independent kingdom, life there under Persian rule doesn't seem to have changed very much from life under Babylonian or Assyrian kings. In fact, life hadn't changed much for 1,200 years. Marduk's temple in Babylon was still in the same place. Judges still heard court cases. Scribes still wrote in the Akkadian language on clay tablets. Houses looked almost the same, and people farmed in much the same way they always had. But the picture was about to change dramatically.

Once again, the Greeks staged a surprising victory, this time led by an ambitious conqueror, Alexander the Great who came to power when he was only 19 years old. In 330



King Darius's palace at Persepolis was built on a high platform with a fabulous view of the surrounding countryside. Some of the huge columns that once held up the ceiling are still standing.

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

560–547 BCE
Croesus of Lydia reigns

559–530 BCE
Cyrus of Persia reigns

550 BCE
Cyrus defeats Medes;
Persian Empire founded

547 BCE
Cyrus defeats Lydia

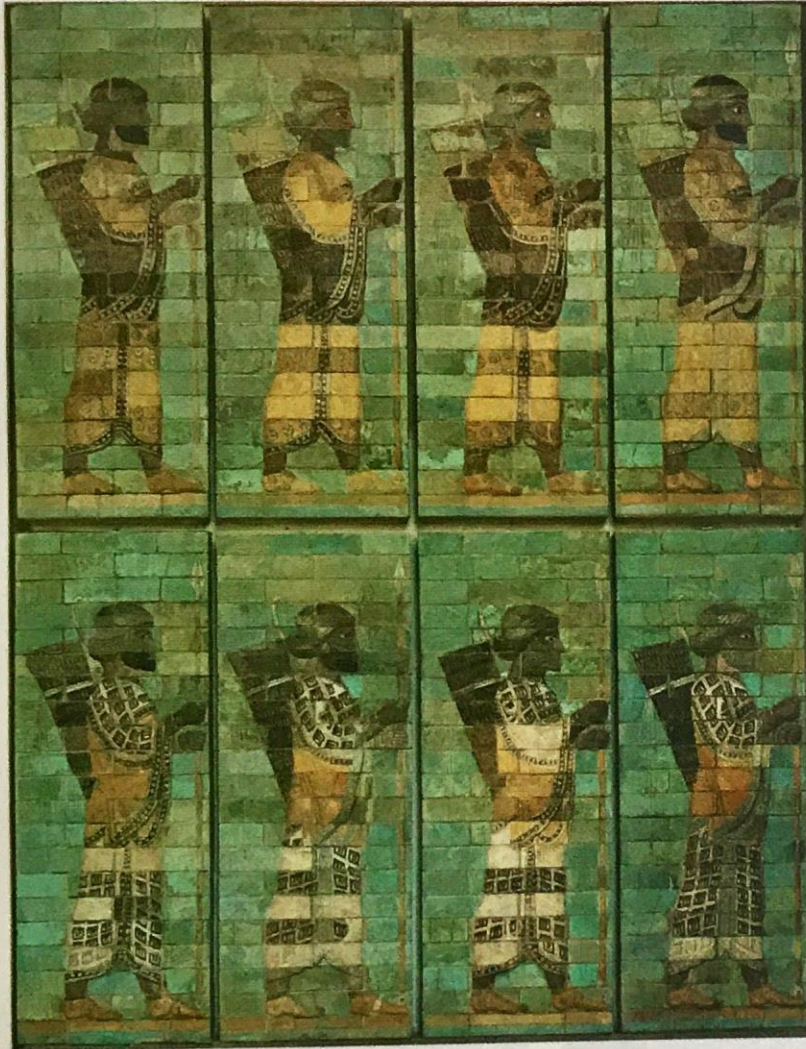
539 BCE
Cyrus defeats Neo-Babylonian Empire

522–486 BCE
Darius I of Persia reigns

490 BCE
Persia attacks Greece

486–465 BCE
Xerxes of Persia reigns

330 BCE
Alexander the Great defeats Persian Empire



Life-sized archers line the walls of Darius's palace. The Persians learned from the Babylonians how to create sculptures using glazed bricks.

BCE, the Greeks, under Alexander, crushed the Persian Empire finally and completely, defeating its last king. The end of the Persian Empire also marked the end of a culture.

Alexander took the clay of the ancient Near East and reshaped it into a very different world. He and the kings who followed him established Greek as the official language of the empire. Even local Babylonians had to learn Greek if they wanted to get ahead. Gradually people forgot the ancient languages of Akkadian and Sumerian. Only a few well-educated scribes could still read cuneiform. And people began to forget the stories that had thrilled them for centuries: stories of the creator god Enlil or the hero Gilgamesh or the mighty king Sargon.

The Greeks built new cities in their own style, with market places, theaters, and gymnasiums. Lavish temples honoring Greek gods, such as Zeus and Athena, dominated the city centers. Meanwhile, the ancient Near Eastern gods—Shamash, Marduk, Ishtar, and all the others—were neglected and eventually abandoned. The Greeks learned astronomy, mathematics, military strategies, and many other things from the Mesopotamians. The concepts of law developed by the Mesopotamians survived, as did the religions of the Jews and the Zoroastrians. But after a few centuries of Greek rule, most of the ancient Near Eastern languages, religions, writing systems, and governments were all lost. The world of the ancient Mesopotamians had disappeared.