

"Persian boys are taught three things only: to ride, to use the bow, and to tell the truth." So said the Greek historian Herodotos, the author of the history of the great wars between the Greeks and the Persians. Throughout the Classical Age of Greece the Persians were the epitome of the foreigner, the outsider with the curious customs, the enemy, the "barbarian" in every sense of the word. Tyranny, luxury, wealth, dissipation and moral decadence were all common aspects of Persian culture (or so the Greeks thought, smug in their self-assurance about the superiority of their own political structure). But Herodotos, generally a fair-minded individual, was not at all averse to recording some of the more positive characteristics of the Persians, such as the simple virtues they taught their young. In fact, Persians are among some of the more heroic figures in his work.

This is truest of all of Cyrus the Great, the first in the long line of the Achaemenid rulers of Persia. Cyrus was the founder of the Persian Empire, the saviour of his own people, and the liberator of others. Although Herodotos presents him as a sometimes bloodthirsty military conqueror (which he no doubt was), the Greek historian also records the heroic traditions about Cyrus, traditions that venerated the Persian ruler to the point of placing him on a level with other historical figures such as Moses and Christ.

The story of Cyrus, like that of many heroes, begins before his birth, and tells of mystical portents and mortal dangers facing the unborn child. Cyrus was the son of Mandane, who was the daughter of Astyages, king of the Median Empire and ruler over a number of subject peoples, including the Persians themselves. Prior to the conception of Cyrus, prior even to Mandane's marriage, her father had been subject to supernatural warnings about his daughter's offspring. He dreamt that a flood came from his daughter's womb and inundated all of Asia. Alarmed by this dream, he consulted the Magi, the Median holy men, and was informed that his daughter's future son would pose a threat to him and his empire. Astyages' plan was then to marry Mandane off to someone of low rank, a mere Persian, not a Median noble (Herodotos fails to mention, since it really isn't necessary to the fairy-tale tone of his story, that the historical Cyrus's father was actually fairly high-ranking, ruler of the Persians and one of Astyages' vassal-kings). But when Mandane became pregnant, Astyages had another dream—this time, a vine grew from her womb and overshadowed Asia. Convinced now that his daughter's half-Persian son would usurp his throne, Astyages, like Pharaoh and like Herod, took steps to rid himself of the threat by ridding himself of the child.

The infant Cyrus was handed over to a servant, a herdsman, with orders to destroy the child. Unable to bring himself to do the terrible deed, the herdsman brought the baby home to his wife. Coincidentally, she had just delivered a still-born child, so the couple was able to produce a body to prove that the murder had been carried out. The whole story bears more than a passing resemblance to such fairy-tales as 'Snow White'.

Cyrus grew up with the herdsman and his wife, never knowing that he wasn't the child of simple servants. Yet his royal nature ultimately shone through, in a game where Cyrus was pretending to be king, and his grandfather Astyages discovered young Cyrus's identity. One might have expected Astyages to make another attempt on Cyrus's life, and to have tried a little harder to do a good job of it this time. But it's typical of stories like this (if not typical of real life!) that wicked characters create the situations for their own downfall. Astyages was satisfied that the threatening prophecy had already been fulfilled in the child's game, and so he allowed Cyrus to live, and sent him off to his real parents in Persia.

So the story goes in Herodotos, at any rate. It's highly unlikely that any of it is true, since it bears so many of the marks of the typical tale of the saviour-hero's childhood. The real Cyrus's early years were no doubt spent as a prince of the vassal kingdom of Persia, learning "to ride, to use the bow and to tell the truth." Such learning must have complemented his natural talents; when Cyrus reached adulthood, around 560 BC, he led the rebellion which liberated his own people, the Persians, and placed them at the head of what was once the Median, but was now the Persian Empire. The next thirty years of his reign were spent in consolidating that empire and expanding its borders until it touched on the Aegean Sea in the west through the absorption of the Greek states of Asia Minor. It's hardly surprising that when Cyrus died, it was in battle, against the nomadic tribes of the far northeast.

The Persian Empire and the Achaemenid line of kings established by Cyrus the Great lasted for over 200 years, until the conquests of Alexander the Great. To the Persians, Cyrus was a great hero and a saviour, and it's no wonder that hero-tales began to grow up around him, the kind of stories that the Greek Herodotos heard and accepted as truth. But the Greeks weren't the only ancient people who passed on the heroic traditions of the first king of the Persian Empire. Cyrus was also remembered with surprising warmth by the Jews, and some of the most intriguing references to the Persian hero come, not from Herodotos, but from the Bible. Cyrus had liberated the Jews from their period of Babylonian exile, permitted them to return to Jerusalem, and assisted them in building their temple. The prophets of the Bible refer to Cyrus as "the shepherd of the Lord", who will fulfill all God's purpose, and whose right hand God has grasped. In

*Isaiah*, Cyrus is called the Lord's "Anointed" or *Messiah*. This is the only passage in the Old Testament where the term *Messiah* is applied to a non-Jew.

So Cyrus was remembered as remarkable by more than just his own people. He was a saviour to the Jews as well, and as for the Greeks, he came to represent to them the perfect type of the virtuous Persian. He was a heroic warrior from Persia's past, the kind of man Persia had produced before the period of the Empire when they all sank into decadence. And when it came time for Alexander the Great to establish his own rule over the decaying, crumbling Persian Empire he looked back to the days of Cyrus and venerated his memory, taking terrible vengeance on those who had plundered Cyrus's tomb in the heartland of Persia, and laying Cyrus's bones to rest once more with reverence. Plutarch records the inscription from that tomb, in a sense the "final words" of Cyrus the Great: "O man, whoever you are and wherever you come from, for I know you will come, I am Cyrus who won the Persians their empire. Do not therefore grudge me this little earth that covers my body."

After a successful visit last year with Sophocles' *Ajax*, Aquila Productions of London, England is returning to present Aristophanes' *Wasps* and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. *Wasps* will be performed in the evening of 27 and 28 September (eight o'clock), and *Coriolanus* will be performed as a matinee on 27 September (two o'clock) and in the evening of 29 September. All performances take place in the Theatre of the Arts, University of Waterloo. Tickets are \$8.00 for students and seniors, \$10.00 regular, available from the UW box office closer to the event. Please plan to take advantage of this opportunity to see outstanding classical theatre on the UW campus.