

Old Testament Backgrounds: The Persian Empire

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Abstract

This lecture examines the rise, expansion, and historical interpretation of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great, Cambyses, and Darius I. Dr. Donald Fowler addresses the critical historiographical challenge presented by the lack of native Persian written records, forcing reliance on heavily biased Greek sources and biblical accounts. The lecture highlights Cyrus's unprecedented humanitarian policies—including religious tolerance, local autonomy, and the repatriation of exiles—alongside the military expansion under Cambyses and Darius that culminated in the Battle of Marathon. Ultimately, the Greco-Persian conflicts marked a monumental geopolitical transition, shifting the center of world power from the Ancient Near East to the Western Greco-Roman sphere.

Outline

I. Methodological Challenges in Reconstructing Persian History

A. Complete Absence of Native Persian Historical Records

1. Total lack of written Persian accounts, with the single major exception of the royal Behistun Inscription.
2. Absence of Persian narrative history forces scholars to reconstruct events without native perspective.

B. Heavy Reliance on Biased Greek Historiography

1. Primary historical sources come from Greek writers (e.g., Herodotus, Xenophon) who viewed Persians as national enemies.
2. Greek accounts frequently exaggerate, caricature, and present a distorted or hostile view of Persian monarchs.

C. Supplementary Historical Sources

1. Biblical text provides significant, favorable historical records concerning Persian rulers (e.g., Isaiah, Ezra).
2. Archaeological data, site stratigraphy, and pottery analysis help backfill information voids.

II. The Rise and Conquests of Cyrus the Great (559 BC)

A. Geopolitical Background and Ascension

1. Cyrus began as a vassal ruler to Astyages, King of Media, the dominant power among Iranian tribes.
2. Astyages summoned Cyrus to Ecbatana; Cyrus refused, prompting Astyages to attack Anshan.
3. Mede troops mutinied against Astyages and delivered him captive to Cyrus.

B. Geopolitical Balance of Power in 559 BC

1. Babylon: Dominant superpower controlling the Fertile Crescent under Nabonidus.
2. Media: Expansive northern and eastern regional empire.
3. Lydia: Wealthy empire occupying the Anatolian Plateau.
4. Egypt: Declining southwestern power ('an old lion').

C. Cyrus's Military Campaigns

1. Unification of Media and Persia, establishing Ecbatana as administrative center.
2. Conquest of Lydia: Surprised King Croesus across the Halys River, captured Sardis, and created a new satrapy.
3. Eastern campaigns: Expanded the empire east to the Indus River basin.
4. Conquest of Babylon: Welcomed by Babylonian citizens as a liberator without fighting.

III. Biblical Significance and Humanitarian Policies of Cyrus

A. Cyrus in Biblical Prophecy

1. Prophesied by name in Isaiah (44:28; 45:1–4) centuries before his birth as God's 'shepherd' and 'anointed'.
2. Academic debates regarding single Isaianic authorship versus Deutero-Isaiah / Trito-Isaiah hypotheses.

B. The World's First Humanitarian Ruler (The Cyrus Cylinder)

1. Promotion of local religious cults and freedom of worship across conquered territories.
2. Leniency and local autonomy granted to defeated foes (e.g., Croesus retained as regional governor).
3. Repatriation policy allowing deported populations to return home (including Jews returning to Jerusalem).
4. Pioneered 'white propaganda', presenting himself as a benevolent liberator rather than a tyrant.

C. Death and Legacy of Cyrus

1. Died in battle against the Massageti in the Caucasus region.
2. Buried in a simple, enduring stone tomb at Pasargadae on the Iranian Plateau.

IV. The Reign and Campaigns of Cambyses

A. Re-evaluating Greek Caricatures of Cambyses

1. Greek historiography (Herodotus) portrays Cambyses as insane and erratic.

2. Alternative strategic perspective: Military decisions reflected logical imperial strategy.

B. Egyptian Campaign and Expansion in Africa

1. Conquered Egypt, capturing Memphis with aid from a defecting Greek mercenary general.
2. Attempted expansion into Ethiopia (Nubia) to control gold production; repulsed by harsh conditions.
3. Dispatched 50,000 troops into the Saharan Desert toward Kyrenia/Libya; entire army perished in a sandstorm.

C. Domestic Succession Crisis and Death

1. Dynastic intermarriage (sister-wife Roxanne) led to genetic complications interpreted as a 'sacred disease'.
2. Usurpation of the throne by Smerdis (or the pseudo-Smerdis, Gaumata).
3. Cambyses died en route back to Persia, reportedly from an accidental self-inflicted sword wound.

V. The Reign of Darius I and Geopolitical Clash with Greece

A. Ascension and Administrative Consolidation

1. Member of the royal Achaemenid bloodline; defeated pseudo-Smerdis within four months.
2. Subdued rebellions across 23 satrapies, killing nine rival kings.
3. Commissioned the trilingual Behistun Inscription (Old Persian, Elamite, Akkadian), unlocked by Sir Henry Rawlinson.

B. Outbreak of the Greco-Persian Conflict

1. Greek city-states incited rebellion among Ionian city-states on the western coast of Anatolia.
2. Darius launched military campaigns across the Hellespont into Thrace and Macedonia to secure borders.

C. The Battle of Marathon (490 BC)

1. Persian force of ~25,000 engaged ~11,000 Greek hoplites.
2. Greek tactical innovations: disciplined hoplite formations, long lances, trumpet signaling, and tactical double envelopment.
3. Persians suffered tactical defeat with ~6,400 casualties.

D. Historical Significance of the Battle of Marathon

1. Deconstructing popular myths: Conflict was not 'democracy vs. tyranny' or 'good vs. evil' (Greeks ruled as oligarchies).
2. First major military engagement between East and West.
3. Initiated a monumental shift of global geopolitical dominance from the Ancient Near East to the Western Greco-Roman sphere.