CYRUS THE GREAT

JACOB ABBOTT

CYRUS THE GREAT

JACOB ABBOTT

Jacob Abbott

Cyrus the Great

BookRix GmbH & Co. KG
81371 Munich

Cyrus the Great

By Jacob Abbott

HERODOTUS AND XENOPHON

B.C. 550-401

The Persian monarchy.—Singular principle of human nature.- -Grandeur of the Persian monarchy.—Its origin.—The republics of Greece.—Written characters Greek and Persian.—Preservation of the Greek language.—Herodotus and Xenophon.—Birth of Herodotus.—Education of the Greeks.—How public affairs were discussed.—Literary entertainments.—Herodotus's early love of knowledge.—Intercourse of nations.—Military expeditions.—Plan of Herodotus's tour.—Herodotus visits Egypt.—Libya and the Straits of Gibraltar.—Route of Herodotus in Asia.—His return to Greece.—Doubts as to the extent of Herodotus's tour.—His history "adorned."—Herodotus's credibility questioned.—Sources of bias.—Samos.—Patmos.—The Olympiads.—Herodotus at Olympia.—History received with applause.—Herodotus at Athens.—His literary fame.—Birth of Xenophon.—Cyrus the Younger.—Ambition of Cyrus.—He attempts to assassinate his brother.—Rebellion of Cyrus.—The Greek auxiliaries.—Artaxerxes assembles his army.—The battle.—Cyrus slain.—Murder of the Greek generals.—Critical situation of the Greeks.—Xenophon's proposal.—Retreat of the Ten Thousand.—Xenophon's retirement.—Xenophon's writings.—Credibility of Herodotus and Xenophon.—Importance of the story.—Object of this work.

Cyrus was the founder of the ancient Persian empire—a monarchy, perhaps, the most wealthy and magnificent which the world has ever seen. Of that strange and incomprehensible principle of human nature, under the influence of which vast masses of men, notwithstanding the universal instinct of aversion to control, combine, under certain circumstances, by millions and millions, to maintain, for many successive centuries, the representatives of some one great family in a condition of exalted, and absolute, and

utterly irresponsible ascendency over themselves, while they toil for them, watch over them, submit to endless and most humiliating privations in their behalf, and commit, if commanded to do so, the most inexcusable and atrocious crimes to sustain the demigods they have thus made in their lofty estate, we have, in the case of this Persian monarchy, one of the most extraordinary exhibitions.

The Persian monarchy appears, in fact, even as we look back upon it from this remote distance both of space and of time, as a very vast wave of human power and grandeur. It swelled up among the populations of Asia, between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, about five hundred years before Christ, and rolled on in undiminished magnitude and glory for many centuries. It bore upon its crest the royal line of Astyages and his successors. Cyrus was, however, the first of the princes whom it held up conspicuously to the admiration of the world and he rode so gracefully and gallantly on the lofty crest that mankind have given him the credit of raising and sustaining the magnificent billow on which he was borne. How far we are to consider him as founding the monarchy, or the monarchy as raising and illustrating him, will appear more fully in the course of this narrative.

Cotemporaneous with this Persian monarchy in the East, there flourished in the West the small but very efficient and vigorous republics of Greece. The Greeks had a written character for their language which could be easily and rapidly executed, while the ordinary language of the Persians was scarcely written at all. There was, it is true, in this latter nation, a certain learned character, which was used by the priests for their mystic records, and also for certain sacred books which constituted the only national archives. It was, however, only slowly and with difficulty that this character could be penned, and, when penned, it was unintelligible to the great mass of the population. For this reason, among others, the Greeks wrote narratives of the

great events which occurred in their day, which narratives they so embellished and adorned by the picturesque lights and shades in which their genius enabled them to present the scenes and characters described as to make them universally admired, while the surrounding nations produced nothing but formal governmental records, not worth to the community at large the toil and labor necessary to decipher them and make them intelligible. Thus the Greek writers became the historians, not only of their own republics, but also of all the nations around them; and with such admirable genius and power did they fulfill this function, that, while the records of all other nations cotemporary with them have been almost entirely neglected and forgotten, the language of the Greeks has been preserved among mankind, with infinite labor and toil, by successive generations of scholars, in every civilized nation, for two thousand years, solely in order that men may continue to read these tales.

Two Greek historians have given us a narrative of the events connected with the life of Cyrus—Herodotus and Xenophon. These writers disagree very materially in the statements which they make, and modern readers are divided in opinion on the question which to believe. In order to present this question fairly to the minds of our readers, we must commence this volume with some account of these two authorities, whose guidance, conflicting as it is, furnishes all the light which we have to follow.

Herodotus was a philosopher and scholar. Xenophon was a great general. The one spent his life in solitary study, or in visiting various countries in the pursuit of knowledge; the other distinguished himself in the command of armies, and in distant military expeditions, which he conducted with great energy and skill. They were both, by birth, men of wealth and high station, so that they occupied, from the beginning, conspicuous positions in society; and as they were both energetic and enterprising in character, they were led, each, to a very romantic and adventurous career,

the one in his travels, the other in his campaigns, so that their personal history and their exploits attracted great attention even while they lived.

Herodotus was born in the year 484 before Christ, which was about fifty years after the death of the Cyrus whose history forms the subject of this volume. He was born in the Grecian state of Caria, in Asia Minor, and in the city of Halicarnassus. Caria, as may be seen from the map at the commencement of this volume, was in the southwestern part of Asia Minor, near the shores of the Ægean Sea. Herodotus became a student at a very early age. It was the custom in Greece, at that time, to give to young men of his rank a good intellectual education. In other nations, the training of the young men, in wealthy and powerful families, was confined almost exclusively to the use of arms, to horsemanship, to athletic feats, and other such accomplishments as would give them a manly and graceful personal bearing, and enable them to excel in the various friendly contests of the public games, as well as prepare them to maintain their ground against their enemies in personal combats on the field of battle. The Greeks, without neglecting these things, taught their young men also to read and to write, explained to them the structure and the philosophy of language, and trained them to the study of the poets, the orators, and the historians which their country had produced. Thus a general taste for intellectual pursuits and pleasures was diffused throughout the community. Public affairs were discussed, before large audiences assembled for the purpose, by orators who felt a great pride and pleasure in the exercise of the power which they had acquired of persuading, convincing, or exciting the mighty masses that listened to them; and at the great public celebrations which were customary in those days, in addition to the wrestlings, the races, the games, and the military spectacles, there were certain literary entertainments provided, which constituted an essential

part of the public pleasures. Tragedies were acted, poems recited, odes and lyrics sung, and narratives of martial enterprises and exploits, and geographical and historical descriptions of neighboring nations, were read to vast throngs of listeners, who, having been accustomed from infancy to witness such performances, and to hear them applauded, had learned to appreciate and enjoy them. Of course, these literary exhibitions would make impressions, more or less strong, on different minds, as the mental temperaments and characters of individuals varied. They seem to have exerted a very powerful influence on the mind of Herodotus in his early years. He was inspired, when very young, with a great zeal and ardor for the attainment of knowledge; and as he advanced toward maturity, he began to be ambitious of making new discoveries, with a view of communicating to his countrymen, in these great public assemblies, what he should thus acquire. Accordingly, as soon as he arrived at a suitable age, he resolved to set out upon a tour into foreign countries, and to bring back a report of what he should see and hear.

The intercourse of nations was, in those days, mainly carried on over the waters of the Mediterranean Sea; and in times of peace, almost the only mode of communication was by the ships and the caravans of the merchants who traded from country to country, both by sea and on the land. In fact, the knowledge which one country possessed of the geography and the manners and customs of another, was almost wholly confined to the reports which these merchants circulated. When military expeditions invaded a territory, the commanders, or the writers who accompanied them, often wrote descriptions of the scenes which they witnessed in their campaigns, and described briefly the countries through which they passed. These cases were, however, comparatively rare; and yet, when they occurred, they furnished accounts better authenticated, and more to be relied upon, and expressed, moreover, in a more

systematic and regular form, than the reports of the merchants, though the information which was derived from both these sources combined was very insufficient, and tended to excite more curiosity than it gratified. Herodotus, therefore, conceived that, in thoroughly exploring the countries on the shores of the Mediterranean and in the interior of Asia, examining their geographical position, inquiring into their history, their institutions, their manners, customs, and laws, and writing the results for the entertainment and instruction of his countrymen, he had an ample field before him for the exercise of all his powers.

He went first to Egypt. Egypt had been until that time, closely shut up from the rest of mankind by the jealousy and watchfulness of the government. But now, on account of some recent political changes, which will be hereafter more particularly alluded to, the way was opened for travelers from other countries to come in. Herodotus was the first to avail himself of this opportunity. He spent some time in the country, and made himself minutely acquainted with its history, its antiquities, its political and social condition at the time of his visit, and with all the other points in respect to which he supposed that his countrymen would wish to be informed. He took copious notes of all that he saw. From Egypt he went westward into Libya, and thence he traveled slowly along the whole southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea as far as to the Straits of Gibraltar, noting, with great care, every thing which presented itself to his own personal observation, and availing himself of every possible source of information in respect to all other points of importance for the object which he had in view.

The Straits of Gibraltar were the ends of the earth toward the westward in those ancient days, and our traveler accordingly, after reaching them, returned again to the eastward. He visited Tyre, and the cities of Phoenicia, on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and thence went still farther eastward to Assyria and Babylon. It was here

that he obtained the materials for what he has written in respect to the Medes and Persians, and to the history of Cyrus. After spending some time in these countries, he went on by land still further to the eastward, into the heart of Asia. The country of Scythia was considered as at "the end of the earth" in this direction. Herodotus penetrated for some distance into the almost trackless wilds of this remote land, until he found that he had gone as far from the great center of light and power on the shores of the Ægean Sea as he could expect the curiosity of his countrymen to follow him. He passed thence round toward the north, and came down through the countries north of the Danube into Greece, by way of the Epirus and Macedon. To make such a journey as this was, in fact, in those days, almost to explore the whole known world.

It ought, however, here to be stated, that many modern scholars, who have examined, with great care, the accounts which Herodotus has given of what he saw and heard in his wanderings, doubt very seriously whether his journeys were really as extended as he pretends. As his object was to read what he was intending to write at great public assemblies in Greece, he was, of course, under every possible inducement to make his narrative as interesting as possible, and not to detract at all from whatever there might be extraordinary either in the extent of his wanderings or in the wonderfulness of the objects and scenes which he saw, or in the romantic nature of the adventures which he met with in his protracted tour. Cicero, in lauding him as a writer, says that he was the first who evinced the power to adorn a historical narrative. Between adorning and embellishing, the line is not to be very distinctly marked; and Herodotus has often been accused of having drawn more from his fancy than from any other source, in respect to a large portion of what he relates and describes. Some do not believe that he ever even entered half the countries which he professes to have thoroughly explored, while others find, in the

minuteness of his specifications, something like conclusive proof that he related only what he actually saw. In a word, the question of his credibility has been discussed by successive generations of scholars ever since his day, and strong parties have been formed who have gone to extremes in the opinions they have taken; so that, while some confer upon him the title of the father of history, others say it would be more in accordance with his merits to call him the father of lies. In controversies like this, and, in fact, in all controversies, it is more agreeable to the mass of mankind to take sides strongly with one party or the other, and either to believe or disbelieve one or the other fully and cordially. There is a class of minds, however, more calm and better balanced than the rest, who can deny themselves this pleasure, and who see that often, in the most bitter and decided controversies, the truth lies between. By this class of minds it has been generally supposed that the narratives of Herodotus are substantially true, though in many cases highly colored and embellished, or, as Cicero called it, adorned, as, in fact, they inevitably must have been under the circumstances in which they were written.

We can not follow minutely the circumstances of the subsequent life of Herodotus. He became involved in some political disturbances and difficulties in his native state after his return, in consequence of which he retired, partly a fugitive and partly an exile, to the island of Samos, which is at a little distance from Caria, and not far from the shore. Here he lived for some time in seclusion, occupied in writing out his history. He divided it into nine books, to which, respectively, the names of the nine Muses were afterward given, to designate them. The island of Samos, where this great literary work was performed, is very near to Patmos, where, a few hundred years later, the Evangelist John, in a similar retirement, and in the use of the same language and character, wrote the Book of Revelation.

When a few of the first books of his history were completed, Herodotus went with the manuscript to Olympia, at the great celebration of the 81st Olympiad. The Olympiads were periods recurring at intervals of about four years. By means of them the Greeks reckoned their time. The Olympiads were celebrated as they occurred, with games, shows, spectacles, and parades, which were conducted on so magnificent a scale that vast crowds were accustomed to assemble from every part of Greece to witness and join in them. They were held at Olympia, a city on the western side of Greece. Nothing now remains to mark the spot but some acres of confused and unintelligible ruins.

The personal fame of Herodotus and of his travels had preceded him, and when he arrived at Olympia he found the curiosity and eagerness of the people to listen to his narratives extreme. He read copious extracts from his accounts, so far as he had written them, to the vast assemblies which convened to hear him, and they were received with unbounded applause; and inasmuch as these assemblies comprised nearly all the statesmen, the generals, the philosophers, and the scholars of Greece, applause expressed by them became at once universal renown. Herodotus was greatly gratified at the interest which his countrymen took in his narratives, and he determined thenceforth to devote his time assiduously to the continuation and completion of his work.

It was twelve years, however, before his plan was finally accomplished. He then repaired to Athens, at the time of a grand festive celebration which was held in that city, and there he appeared in public again, and read extended portions of the additional books that he had written. The admiration and applause which his work now elicited was even greater than before. In deciding upon the passages to be read, Herodotus selected such as would be most likely to excite the interest of his Grecian hearers, and many of them

were glowing accounts of Grecian exploits in former wars which had been waged in the countries which he had visited. To expect that, under such circumstances, Herodotus should have made his history wholly impartial, would be to suppose the historian not human.

The Athenians were greatly pleased with the narratives which Herodotus thus read to them of their own and of their ancestors' exploits. They considered him a national benefactor for having made such a record of their deeds, and, in addition to the unbounded applause which they bestowed upon him, they made him a public grant of a large sum of money. During the remainder of his life Herodotus continued to enjoy the high degree of literary renown which his writings had acquired for him—a renown which has since been extended and increased, rather than diminished, by the lapse of time.

As for Xenophon, the other great historian of Cyrus, it has already been said that he was a military commander, and his life was accordingly spent in a very different manner from that of his great competitor for historic fame. He was born at Athens, about thirty years after the birth of Herodotus, so that he was but a child while Herodotus was in the midst of his career. When he was about twenty-two years of age, he joined a celebrated military expedition which was formed in Greece, for the purpose of proceeding to Asia Minor to enter into the service of the governor of that country. The name of this governor was Cyrus; and to distinguish him from Cyrus the Great, whose history is to form the subject of this volume, and who lived about one hundred and fifty years before him, he is commonly called Cyrus the Younger.

This expedition was headed by a Grecian general named Clearchus. The soldiers and the subordinate officers of the expedition did not know for what special service it was designed, as Cyrus had a treasonable and guilty object in view, and he kept it accordingly concealed, even from the

agents who were to aid him in the execution of it. His plan was to make war upon and dethrone his brother Artaxerxes, then king of Persia, and consequently his sovereign. Cyrus was a very young man, but he was a man of a very energetic and accomplished character, and of unbounded ambition. When his father died, it was arranged that Artaxerxes, the older son, should succeed him. Cyrus was extremely unwilling to submit to this supremacy of his brother. His mother was an artful and unprincipled woman, and Cyrus, being the youngest of her children, was her favorite. She encouraged him in his ambitious designs; and so desperate was Cyrus himself in his determination to accomplish them, that it is said he attempted to assassinate his brother on the day of his coronation. His attempt was discovered, and it failed. His brother, however, instead of punishing him for the treason, had the generosity to pardon him, and sent him to his government in Asia Minor. Cyrus immediately turned all his thoughts to the plan of raising an army and making war upon his brother, in order to gain forcible possession of his throne. That he might have a plausible pretext for making the necessary military preparations, he pretended to have a quarrel with one of his neighbors, and wrote, hypocritically, many letters to the king, affecting solicitude for his safety, and asking aid. The king was thus deceived, and made no preparations to resist the force which Cyrus was assembling, not having the remotest suspicion that its destiny was Babylon.

The auxiliary army which came from Greece to enter into Cyrus's service under these circumstances, consisted of about thirteen thousand men. He had, it was said, a hundred thousand men besides; but so celebrated were the Greeks in those days for their courage, their discipline, their powers of endurance, and their indomitable tenacity and energy, that Cyrus very properly considered this corps as the flower of his army. Xenophon was one of the younger Grecian generals. The army crossed the Hellespont, and

entered Asia Minor, and, passing across the country, reached at last the famous pass of Cilicia, in the southwestern part of the country—a narrow defile between the mountains and the sea, which opens the only passage in that quarter toward the Persian regions beyond. Here the suspicions which the Greeks had been for some time inclined to feel, that they were going to make war upon the Persian monarch himself, were confirmed, and they refused to proceed. Their unwillingness, however, did not arise from any compunctions of conscience about the guilt of treason, or the wickedness of helping an ungrateful and unprincipled wretch, whose forfeited life had once been given to him by his brother, in making war upon and destroying his benefactor. Soldiers have never, in any age of the world, any thing to do with compunctions of conscience in respect to the work which their commanders give them to perform. The Greeks were perfectly willing to serve in this or in any other undertaking; but, since it was rebellion and treason that was asked of them, they considered it as specially hazardous, and so they concluded that they were entitled to extra pay. Cyrus made no objection to this demand; an arrangement was made accordingly, and the army went on.

Artaxerxes assembled suddenly the whole force of his empire on the plains of Babylon—an immense army, consisting, it is said, of over a million of men. Such vast forces occupy, necessarily, a wide extent of country, even when drawn up in battle array. So great, in fact, was the extent occupied in this case, that the Greeks, who conquered all that part of the king's forces which was directly opposed to them, supposed, when night came, at the close of the day of battle, that Cyrus had been every where victorious; and they were only undeceived when, the next day, messengers came from the Persian camp to inform them that Cyrus's whole force, excepting themselves, was defeated and dispersed, and that Cyrus

himself was slain, and to summon them to surrender at once and unconditionally to the conquerors.

The Greeks refused to surrender. They formed themselves immediately into a compact and solid body, fortified themselves as well as they could in their position, and prepared for a desperate defense. There were about ten thousand of them left, and the Persians seem to have considered them too formidable to be attacked. The Persians entered into negotiations with them, offering them certain terms on which they would be allowed to return peaceably into Greece. These negotiations were protracted from day to day for two or three weeks, the Persians treacherously using toward them a friendly tone, and evincing a disposition to treat them in a liberal and generous manner. This threw the Greeks off their guard, and finally the Persians contrived to get Clearchus and the leading Greek generals into their power at a feast, and then they seized and murdered them, or, as they would perhaps term it, executedthem as rebels and traitors. When this was reported in the Grecian camp, the whole army was thrown at first into the utmost consternation. They found themselves two thousand miles from home, in the heart of a hostile country, with an enemy nearly a hundred times their own number close upon them, while they themselves were without provisions, without horses, without money; and there were deep rivers, and rugged mountains, and every other possible physical obstacle to be surmounted, before they could reach their own frontiers. If they surrendered to their enemies, a hopeless and most miserable slavery was their inevitable doom.

Under these circumstances, Xenophon, according to his own story, called together the surviving officers in the camp, urged them not to despair, and recommended that immediate measures should be taken for commencing a march toward Greece. He proposed that they should elect commanders to take the places of those who had been