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## The Ancient Iranian Perception of Cyrus the Great

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### Abstract

While the only surviving legends of Cyrus the Great are found in Graeco-Roman sources, such sources ultimately speak to the varied views of Cyrus in Achaemenid Iran. Following a survey of the historical conditions leading to the rise of the Persian Empire under Cyrus and its consolidation under Darius, this article explores the characteristics of western Iranian historiography of the Median “state” and dawn of the Persian Empire in the Achaemenid period. This article argues that the Median and Iranian orientation of the Achaemenid Empire from the time of Darius provided the grounds for the infusing of Young Avestan myths and legends in western Iran. In particular, this article investigates parallels between stories of Cyrus the Great and those of Kauui Haosrauuh (Kay Khosrow); an investigation that points to the assimilation of the former with the latter that likely began in the Achaemenid period and later led to a two-way interaction of legends about these figures. In addition, this article also explores the Iranian tradition’s depiction of Alexander and his association with Kay Khosrow, which is similar to his association with Cyrus the Great in western sources and may further show Cyrus the Great’s assimilation with the Iranian tradition through his identification with Kay Khosrow.

**Keywords:** Cyrus the Great; Medes/Medians; Achaemenids; Alexander; Western Iran; oral Iranian tradition; oral Iranian epigraphy

### Introduction

The Iranian view of Cyrus the Great is comprised of the Iranian world of the Persian Empire’s opinion of him in its own cultural milieu. However, such a discussion is hampered by the paucity of Iranian material on Cyrus, as his memory appears to have been forgotten in Iran by late antiquity, at the latest.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, apart from the brief mention of “Cyrus of our family” in the Behistun inscription (DB I.10), we only find detailed accounts of Cyrus—presumably coming from Iranian circles—in Greek and Latin sources. In order to extract the Iranian point of view of Cyrus from these sources, we must consider the Greek lens and its perspective of the Persian Empire.<sup>2</sup> However, teasing out the nature of the Iranian tradition and what it entailed in the Achaemenid period through this method is not easy. Apart from brief references in Avestan texts, Iranian legends only begin appearing in the much later Iranian national tradition of the early Islamic period,<sup>3</sup> but the evolution of this tradition from Avestan times to late antiquity is not well understood. Thus, we must consider the chronological problems inherent in comparing Greek sources of Achaemenid period and the later Iranian tradition.

<sup>1</sup> Daryaei, “On Forgetting Cyrus.”

<sup>2</sup> Sancisi-Weerdenburg & Kuhrt, *Achaemenid History II*.

<sup>3</sup> Yarshater, “Iranian National History.”

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