



## Teacher Guide

### The Cyrus Cylinder

The Cyrus Cylinder, a proclamation by the Persian king Cyrus the Great, gives rare historical insight into ancient Persian culture. This guide can be used to teach about Cyrus and his cylinder, on display at the Getty Villa in the exhibition *The Cyrus Cylinder and Ancient Persia: A New Beginning* from October 2 to December 2, 2013. The guide contains information for teachers, suggested discussion questions, and activities for students that can be carried out in the Villa's galleries or in the classroom.

### Background Information

Cyrus II (circa 600–530 B.C.), known as Cyrus the Great, was a venerated Persian king and empire builder who ruled from 559 to 530 B.C. Under his leadership, the Persian Empire expanded to cover a vast geographical area, including multiethnic populations speaking many languages. Building on Cyrus's achievements, his successors, Cambyses II and Darius I, extended Persian control to the Mediterranean Sea in the west and India in the east, and by the early fifth century B.C., the Persian Empire was the largest the world had ever known. In building their empires on a foundation established by Cyrus, first Alexander the Great and later the Romans borrowed many aspects of his system of administration.



This map is located in Gallery 202.

# The Cyrus Cylinder: Teacher Guide



The Cyrus Cylinder  
Achaemenid, after 539 B.C.  
Found in Babylon, Iraq  
Terracotta  
Length: 22.5cm  
Image courtesy of and ©  
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Excitingly, Cyrus's own words have been preserved in Babylonian cuneiform script in a clay proclamation called the Cyrus Cylinder, discovered in Babylon in 1879. The barrel-shaped cylinder records Cyrus's conquest of the city in 539 B.C. Following local custom, Cyrus buried the document under the city walls during reconstruction and rebuilding activities. The text would also have been circulated at the time so that his goals and version of the conquest could become known. (Fragments of a clay tablet bearing a matching inscription survive and show that the proclamation was not intended only for burial.)

In his proclamation, Cyrus describes the relief he brought to the inhabitants of Babylon, helping them recover from the bad practices and behavior of Nabonidus, the previous king. Cyrus claims that the Babylonian god Marduk chose him as the new ruler and orchestrated his victory. Cyrus sent a number of images of gods seized by Nabonidus back to their proper temples in other cities and even restored the temples. He also organized the return to their homelands of a number of conquered peoples who had been relocated to Babylonia. Although the Jews are not mentioned in the proclamation, their return to Jerusalem (following their deportation earlier in the sixth century B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar II) would have been in line with this policy. Cyrus's account accords with biblical references acknowledging and praising him for his role in returning the Jews to their homeland.

Cyrus's proclamation parallels, in many ways, earlier inscriptions by other rulers and conquerors of Babylon. In returning exiles to their homes and allowing people to worship their own gods, Cyrus showed himself to be a suitable local king and a restorer of order and tradition. More unusual is his reputation recounted by other sources, including Persia's enemies. Long before the discovery of the cylinder in 1879, Cyrus was renowned in both Greek and biblical texts as an enlightened ruler, an effective and humane king who successfully maintained order among the many different populations he conquered. The cylinder thus provides support—in Cyrus's own words—for a legacy and reputation that has lasted millennia.

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## Questions for Teaching

Read the translation of the Cyrus Cylinder in the accompanying student guide and prompt students with the following questions.

- The Cyrus Cylinder is written in cuneiform. What do you notice about the writing? Why do you think the text was written on a cylinder when flat tablets were more common?
- This document shows what Cyrus wanted people in the future to learn about him. How does he represent himself as a ruler?
- Why might someone bury a document like this under a city wall?

## Related Content Standards for California Public Schools

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

#### Grade 6–12

#### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

#### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

#### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing

9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

#### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language

4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

### CALIFORNIA STATE CONTENT STANDARDS FOR HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES

#### Grade Six

6.2 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Kush.

