

An Important Iranian Visitor is Coming: The Cyrus Cylinder
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We are accustomed to seeing Iranians as revolutionary Shiite Muslims at war with the world, exemplified by Ayatollah Khamenei (and before him, father of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini). Soon-to-be ex-president Mahmud Ahmadinejad has been a mouthpiece for every obnoxious pronouncement such as Holocaust denial, denial that homosexuality exists in Iran, and membership in the cabal of fascist dictatorships, along with North Korea, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe, just to name a few. (They all gathered for the funeral of the late Hugo Chavez of Venezuela.)

But an ancient Iranian visitor is on tour around the United States, a 2400-year old-clay object, the \223Cyrus Cylinder,\224 recently found in Iran and greeted there with great reverence. What makes this object so important is that it represents what Iran (Persia) was at its beginnings and what it suggests may be Iran\222s future: a document that is called by many today the world\222s first Charter of Human Rights.

Iran has managed three empires in its past: the Achaemenian, Parthian, and Sasanian, before being conquered by the Muslim hordes in 644 AD. The Achaemenian Empire, founded in 539 BC by a Persian king, Cyrus The Great, amassed territory from North India in a swath through Central Asia, Asia Minor (today\222s Turkey), and into Egypt and North Africa, becoming the world\222s largest empire to that time. Cyrus appears to have been an administrative genius. He recognized that his conquests embraced multiple ethnicities, languages, and religions. Naked force wouldn\222t be able to keep it together, but intelligent management could. Furthermore, he abandoned the standard practice of burning, looting and raping in the conquered lands.

He was widely seen as a liberator, particularly to the Jews who had been living in captivity in Babylon (today\222s Iraq). He let them return to their homeland and funded the rebuilding of their Temple. Cyrus is revered in the Bible as an agent of God.

He established a policy that all conquered people were free to practice their religions and customs as long as they maintained peace and order (the primary message etched on the cylinder and sent out in many copies throughout the Empire). The Persians did not colonize because their population was not large enough, but he saw to it that roads for rapid post and merchant trading were built throughout the empire, a policy that enriched them all. His policy mandated an annual budget; monetary, legal, and postal systems; a network of roads throughout the Empire; a standing professional army, navy, and civil service; and a mandate of tolerance, justice, respect, and equality for its subjects.

His policy kept that first empire alive until 330 BC, falling briefly to Alexander the Great, whose empire was modeled on the Achaemenian.

Cyrus was a Zoroastrian, the first monotheistic religion in the world with a code that demanded personal responsibility for siding with the good (virtue) or the bad (evil), decisions that would be rewarded or punished after death. Apparently Cyrus took this seriously.

Cyrus was recognized and imitated by later successful imperial powers: by Alexander the Great, Rome, Napoleon, the British Empire, and he was particularly admired by Thomas Jefferson, not for his imperial skills, but for his tolerance. We are thus distant descendants of Cyrus the Great\222s world vision.

It is fascinating that Iranians, despite their 30-plus years under of a far less tolerant system, have not forgotten who they really are. The Cylinder has made the rounds of museums in Iran, then London, and now the United States.

Iran has enjoyed at least four renaissances, each time coming back from devastation to flower once more. They even managed to turn the Mongol ravages in the 13th century into a period in which the destructive Mongols became patrons of the arts and rather good Persian-speaking imperial administrators.

This artifact reminds us that great ideas live well beyond their authors, and that a cultural treasure like this, and how it is being received in Iran, can give hope that one day Iran will be once more as Cyrus envisioned it. Happy New Year, Iranians.

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