

# The Biography of Cambyses II



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- **Part One: Cambyses, heir to the Throne**

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## **The Death of a Legend and a Son Forced to Wear the Crown**

Around 530 BCE, when Cyrus the Great lost his life during campaigns in the eastern regions of his empire, the Achaemenid Empire faced its first major crisis.

Cyrus was not merely the founder of a state.

He was the creator of the largest empire known to the world at that time.

He had brought Media, Lydia, Babylon, and vast regions of Central Asia under his rule and had established a political order unlike anything that had previously existed.

Yet, as with many great empires throughout history, the most important question was not how the empire had been created.

The real question was how it would survive after the death of its founder.

According to historical sources, before his death, Cyrus had chosen his eldest son, Cambyses, as his successor.

Before ascending to the throne, Cambyses had already gained experience in governing state affairs.

Some Babylonian sources indicate that during his father's lifetime, he participated in the administration of Babylon and imperial affairs.

This suggests that his succession was not a sudden decision.

Rather, it was part of Cyrus's political plan for the transfer of power.

Nevertheless, Cambyses ascended the throne under circumstances that no ruler before him had ever faced.

He was not inheriting a local kingdom.

He was inheriting an empire that stretched from the Indus River to the shores of the Mediterranean and encompassed dozens of peoples, languages, and political traditions.

- **Part Two: The First Steps of Kingship**

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## **The Empire That Cambyses Inherited**

When Cambyses II ascended the throne of the Achaemenid Empire, he inherited the largest empire known to the world.

This empire was no longer merely a collection of conquered territories.

It was gradually becoming a political structure that had to preserve the coexistence of dozens of peoples, cultures, and administrative systems.

In the west, the coasts of Asia Minor and the wealthy Kingdom of Lydia were under Persian rule.

In Mesopotamia, the legendary city of Babylon, with its ancient traditions and advanced administrative apparatus, stood as one of the most important centers of the empire.

In the east, the vast territories of Central Asia and the regions surrounding the Indus River, which Cyrus had spent the final years of his life consolidating, still required constant attention and oversight.

At the heart of this empire lay Persia and Media.

The alliance between these two peoples formed the foundation of Achaemenid power.

Although Cyrus had successfully maintained a political balance between the Persian and Median elites, preserving that balance after his death was a difficult and sensitive task.

Moreover, the Achaemenid Empire had not yet fully consolidated many of its administrative institutions.

A considerable portion of imperial authority rested not upon permanent laws and institutions, but upon the personality, prestige, and personal authority of Cyrus himself.

For this reason, the death of the empire's founder could rapidly create conditions for political rivalry, local rebellions, and a succession crisis.

Under such circumstances, Cambyses had to prove to everyone that he was not only the son of Cyrus, but also his worthy successor.

However, while many internal challenges remained unresolved, Cambyses had already fixed his gaze upon a land that represented the last great independent power of the ancient world.

That land was Egypt.

With its thousands of years of civilization, legendary wealth, and ancient political traditions, Egypt represented the final great rival of the Achaemenid Empire.

The conquest of Egypt would not only expand the borders of the empire.

It would also establish Cambyses as the true successor of Cyrus.

Perhaps for this reason, the second Achaemenid king, shortly after consolidating his authority, decided to pursue the path that his father had never been given the opportunity to complete.

- **Chapter Three: The Young King on the Path of Conquest**

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### **Why Egypt?**

At the time of Cambyses' accession, only one major independent power remained in the civilized world that still resisted the expansion of the Achaemenid Empire.

That power was undoubtedly Egypt.

Egypt was not only one of the oldest civilizations in the world.

Because of its geographical position,  
agricultural wealth, and political and religious  
traditions, it also occupied an exceptional  
position.

For centuries, the pharaohs of Egypt had  
ruled one of the wealthiest lands on earth.

Even during periods of political weakness,  
Egypt continued to possess immense prestige  
and influence.

Despite all his conquests, Cyrus the Great  
never had the opportunity to incorporate  
Egypt into the Achaemenid realm.

As a result, Egypt became, in many ways, the final great objective of Achaemenid expansionist policy.

Yet the conquest of Egypt was not merely a military undertaking.

For Cambyses, this campaign also possessed tremendous political and symbolic significance.

He had to demonstrate to the Persian, Median, and other subject elites that he was the worthy heir of Cyrus and capable of preserving and expanding the empire.

At the same time, Egypt itself was facing internal difficulties.

Pharaoh Amasis, who for many years had skillfully preserved Egyptian independence, found himself increasingly threatened by Persian power during the final years of his reign.

He attempted to establish alliances with Greek city states and various regional powers.

However, these efforts failed to prevent the growing influence of the Achaemenid Empire.

According to some Greek sources, political and personal disputes between the Egyptian and Persian courts also contributed to the escalating tensions.

Although many of these accounts are viewed with skepticism today, what remains certain is that by the late sixth century BCE, confrontation between Egypt and the Achaemenid Empire had become almost unavoidable.

Cambyses did not rely solely on military force in preparation for the invasion of Egypt.

By employing diplomacy, regional alliances, and the dissatisfaction of some of Egypt's neighbors, he created the conditions necessary for one of the most significant military campaigns of the ancient world.

Thus, the second Achaemenid king prepared to march toward a land that embodied thousands of years of history, religion, and political power.

A land whose conquest would make Cambyses the ruler of the largest empire in world history up to that point.

- **Chapter Four: The Young King in the Shadow of Conquest**

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### **The Road to the Nile**

The campaign against Egypt, unlike many earlier Achaemenid conquests, was not dependent solely on military strength.

Between the Achaemenid Empire and Egypt lay one of the most difficult natural barriers of the ancient world.

The vast and dry deserts of the Sinai Peninsula turned the passage of a large army into a complex and dangerous operation.

Cambyses was fully aware that failure to secure water and supplies could destroy his army even before facing the Egyptian forces.

For this reason, alongside military preparations, he turned to diplomacy.

According to Herodotus, Cambyses succeeded in reaching an agreement with the Arab tribes inhabiting the desert regions.

These tribes took responsibility for supplying water and supporting the Achaemenid army during its crossing of the Sinai Desert.

Although the details of this account are debated among historians, the core idea suggests that Cambyses' success was not solely the result of military power.

It also depended on his ability to form alliances and exploit regional political conditions.

At the same time, Egypt was facing its own internal difficulties.

Pharaoh Amasis, who had long been the main obstacle to Persian expansion, died shortly before the Persian invasion.

His son Psamtik III ascended the throne.

However, he lacked both his father's political experience and sufficient time to consolidate his authority.

As a result, Egypt entered one of the most critical moments in its history, facing internal instability and external threat at the same time.

Cambyses, after crossing the Sinai Desert, advanced his army toward the eastern borders of Egypt.

There, near the city of Pelusium, one of the most decisive battles of the ancient world took place.

A battle that would not only determine the fate of Egypt, but also reshape the balance of power in the Near East for centuries.

Very little is known with certainty about the details of this battle.

However, most historical sources agree that the Achaemenid army succeeded in defeating the Egyptian forces and opened the path into one of the oldest civilizations in the world.

### **The Fall of Memphis**

After the defeat of Egyptian forces at Pelusium, the road to the heart of Egypt was open.

The young pharaoh Psamtik III attempted to continue resistance, but the military and political superiority of the Persians made sustained defense impossible.

Soon after, Memphis, the traditional capital of Egypt, fell to Cambyses' forces.

With the fall of Memphis, one of the oldest and most prestigious kingdoms of the ancient world was formally incorporated into the Achaemenid Empire.

This was not merely a military victory.

Cambyses now ruled over a land whose civilization stretched back more than two thousand years, and whose kings had long considered themselves divine representatives on earth.

For this reason, Cambyses' greatest challenge after the conquest of Egypt was not the defeat of its army, but the establishment of legitimacy among its people and elites.

Contrary to the image later presented by some Greek writers, available evidence suggests that Cambyses initially attempted to preserve the political and religious traditions of Egypt.

Some Egyptian documents and surviving inscriptions indicate that he adopted the title of Pharaoh and sought to present himself as

the legitimate successor of Egypt's traditional rulers.

This policy was, in fact, a continuation of the approach used by Cyrus the Great in Babylon.

Rule over diverse peoples was not achieved through the destruction of their traditions, but through their incorporation and adaptation.

However, the famous account of Herodotus presents a very different image.

In this narrative, Cambyses gradually becomes a cruel, unpredictable, and even mad ruler.

He is accused of insulting Egyptian sacred traditions, violating royal tombs, and even killing the sacred Apis bull.

For centuries, this narrative shaped the dominant image of Cambyses in Western historiography.

But did these accusations reflect historical reality?

