



Activity Two: The Cyrus Cylinder

Introduction

When Cyrus entered Babylon in 539 BC, he immediately set about trying to secure his newly-won conquest. To do so, he went on a charm offensive and tried to convince the Babylonian people that they should support him. The Cyrus Cylinder is a cuneiform cylinder, now housed in the British Museum, and reveals some of Cyrus' methods. The Cylinder must have been written fairly soon after Cyrus won control of Babylon, and was clearly produced by somebody in a position of authority. It was written to send a powerful message to the population of Babylon.

The Cylinder has held major significance since it was discovered in 1879. Although primarily displayed in the British Museum, it was loaned to Iran as part of the celebrations for the 2500th birthday of Cyrus. Part of the reason for its popularity is the contentious claim that it represents the first declaration of universal human rights – a theory first put forward in the 1960s by Iranian scholars and, particularly, by the ruler of Iran, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Historians do not all accept this argument, however, with many pointing out that the Cylinder is part of a long tradition of Mesopotamian building inscriptions, and that its central messages are part of the religious orthodoxy in Babylon and had been espoused for centuries. Nevertheless, the UN continues to display a copy of the cylinder in its New York headquarters in celebration of its supposed message.

Text

The text can be found on the British Museum website; http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=327188&partId=1. (To find the text you need to scroll down the website to the section called 'Inscriptions', where there are two different translations of the inscription - it is acceptable to use either translation)

Starter Activity

Make a list of the pros and cons of this source. You should consider questions such as: 'how likely is this source to be reliable', 'what kind of information does this source reveal?' and 'what kind of information can I not get from this particular source'.

Think particularly about **who** wrote the source, **why** they produced it, and **how** it was composed.

Further Reading

More information about the Cyrus Cylinder can be found in the following places:

- The British Museum [website](#)
- [Wikipedia](#)
- [Livius.org](#)