

## THE CYRUS CYLINDER. A CORNERSTONE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

**DANILO ĐIKANOVIĆ**

[danilodjikanovic01@gmail.com](mailto:danilodjikanovic01@gmail.com)

Doctoral degree in Economic diplomacy, European Center for Peace and Development, United Nations University for Peace (ECPD - UPEACE). He is Advisor, Ministry of Defence of Montenegro, Directorate for Defence Policy, NATO and EU Department, EU Unit (Montenegro). He has been Research assistant at the United Nations University, Blue Peace Financing Intern at the United Nations Capital Development Fund and National consultant for data and knowledge management at the United Nations Development Programme.

### Abstract

This research examines the content of the Cyrus Cylinder and its relevance for the development and interpretation of the concept of human rights. Through a parallel analysis, it assesses the relationship between the cylinder and legal instruments embodied in human rights declarations, agreements, and treaties over a period of two and a half millennia, culminating in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. By reviewing academic and scholarly literature on the history of the Achaemenid Empire and the policies that shaped the reign of Cyrus the Great, the study addresses the question of whether human rights can be meaningfully associated with the act of carving a cylinder that once regulated aspects of life within a diverse imperial context. Drawing on historical sources, the analysis suggests that the ideas reflected in the Cyrus Cylinder can be situated within broader Mesopotamian governance traditions, rather than understood as a singular point of origin. An examination of the cylinder's content alongside Cyrus' governance policies further highlights the limitations of these early normative concepts, as well as the political and administrative motivations underlying the creation of this declaration.

### Keywords

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Magna Carta; the Declaration of Independence; the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen; the Bill of Rights.

### Resumo

Esta investigação examina o conteúdo do Cilindro de Ciro e a sua relevância para o desenvolvimento e a interpretação do conceito de direitos humanos. Através de uma análise paralela, avalia a relação entre o cilindro e os instrumentos jurídicos consagrados em declarações, acordos e tratados de direitos humanos ao longo de um período de dois milénios e meio, culminando na Declaração Universal dos Direitos Humanos. Ao analisar a literatura académica e científica sobre a história do Império Aqueménida e as políticas que moldaram o reinado de Ciro, o Grande, o estudo aborda a questão de saber se os direitos humanos podem ser significativamente associados ao ato de esculpir um cilindro que outrora regulava aspetos da vida num contexto imperial diversificado. Com base em fontes históricas, a análise sugere que as ideias refletidas no Cilindro de Ciro podem ser situadas no âmbito de tradições de governação mesopotâmicas mais amplas, em vez de serem entendidas como um ponto de origem singular. Uma análise do conteúdo do cilindro, a par das políticas de governação de Ciro, destaca ainda mais as limitações destes conceitos normativos primitivos, bem como as motivações políticas e administrativas subjacentes à criação desta declaração.



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**Palavras-chave**

Declaração Universal dos Direitos Humanos; Magna Carta; Declaração de Independência; Declaração dos Direitos do Homem e do Cidadão; Carta dos Direitos.

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### Introduction

Human rights have evolved over thousands of years. Although they were not formally recognised for long periods, they nevertheless existed and, in rare instances, were legally articulated even in ancient times. One of the most notable examples relates to the Cyrus cylinder, which once served as an instrument for the establishment of basic human rights. The practice of these rights, as today, depended to a large extent on the system of governance and political will shaped by existing interests. Nevertheless, we are witnessing that in the 21st century, human rights are a daily struggle for their position as the basic premises of public policy. An important argument for their realization is the reliance on historical heritage, which was recognized by the United Nations system in 1971, by ceremoniously taking over and presenting a copy of the cylinder as a forerunner of human rights.

Opinions about the cylinder as a true forerunner of human rights are divided, taking into account their existence in the reigns that preceded Cyrus the Great. The view expressed in this study relies on the thesis that, despite the existence of basic human rights in the pre-Cyrus period, they first gained para-legal force with the spread of the Cyrus' declaration throughout the Achaemenid Empire, carved on a clay cylinder in the 6th century BC. Therefore, the aim of this research is to prove the connection between the cylinder and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, through a parallel analysis of legal instruments. To this end, it seeks to identify the human rights declared in the time of Cyrus the Great, as well as to provide an overview of the legal foundations of human rights in the interim period to their global consensus in the 20th and 21st centuries. In more precise terms, this analysis does not seek to provide an exhaustive genealogy of human rights, but rather to highlight selected normative milestones that illustrate the *longue durée* of human rights thought.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly cautions against treating human rights as a timeless or linear concept. Rather than emerging fully formed, human rights have evolved through historically contingent processes shaped by political power, cultural negotiation, and normative reinterpretation. As Kundal (2023) notes, early articulations of justice, tolerance, and protection, while lacking the legal universality of modern human rights regimes, nevertheless constituted foundational moral frameworks that later traditions could draw upon. From this perspective, ancient texts such as the Cyrus Cylinder should



not be read as modern rights instruments, but as early normative expressions that contributed to the long genealogy of human rights thought.

The subject is examined by conducting qualitative research, using secondary sources and reviewing available literature on the history of Persia and the development of human rights to date. Sources

include scientific papers, declarations, agreements and treaties on human rights, publications of international organizations, as well as documented records of the British Museum, which houses the

Cyrus Cylinder since its discovery in the 19th century. Academic institutions, including the faculties of history in Serbia, Montenegro and Austria, as well as the Cultural Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran, were reached to collect research material, while certain parts of the literature were also found in the US Library of Congress.

In the following, the research is displayed in three parts:

- 1) Overview of the Persian history and human rights in the era of Cyrus the Great.
- 2) Parallels between the Cyrus cylinder and the subsequent legislation on human rights.
- 3) Conclusions based on collected evidence.

### **Human rights in the era of Cyrus the Great**

Human rights are historically associated with the abolition of slavery, realization of women's rights and fight against racism, as some of the most prominent examples. The development of the concept of human rights however, stretches through thousands of years, and today it includes economic, social, cultural, civil, political and other human rights. Fundamental human rights were globally established by a joint declaration of the member states of the United Nations system in 1948. The declaration is stated as universal, which means that it applies to all countries of this world, *i.e.* that the indicated human rights represent the basic rights of all people, regardless of the system of government, nation or culture to which they belong.

The exact origin of human rights is difficult to determine. It is known that certain rights, today recognized as natural rights, have existed for millennia, notably the rights to life and freedom. However, history records an immeasurable number of examples of violations of these rights, so the cases of their realization were documented as features of the time. The reason for their record often implied the establishment of political power, but over time it acquired a different meaning. Since the exercise of fundamental rights is largely dependent on the system of government, their development has been dynamic. Accordingly, references to the historical existence of such rights have recurrently informed subsequent efforts to secure freedom. On the other hand, the records served the new rulers to gain the support of the people and strengthen their own position, as well as to secure the borders of the empire.

One such example refers to Cyrus the Great, an ancient ruler, whose existence was one of the turningpoints in the social development of future civilizations. Cyrus the Great was the king of Persia, who ruled in the period from 559-530 BC in the vast territories of



Mesopotamia. Unlike his predecessors, he managed to expand the Persian territories to the size of an imposing multiethnic empire. He cultivated a favourable reputation following the conquest of Babylon in 539 BC, entering the city with his army and consolidating power without open conflict. Even today, the peaceful way of taking over Babylonian territory is portrayed by a divine act. Cyrus the Great himself encouraged such a narrative. Namely, historical records speak of the previous dissatisfaction of the people who lived under Nabonidus, based on religious exclusivity, cultural intolerance and the decline of the general quality of life.

The time of Cyrus' reign is known as a period of relative peace, tolerance and freedom. Wars did exist, predominantly outside their own borders for the purpose of expanding territories, while the goal of suppressing internal unrest was mainly to establish peaceful coexistence of different peoples in the conquered territories. Whether peace was the principle by which Cyrus was morally guided leaves much room for debate. However, it is clear that peace also served a political purpose. The cohesion of different cultures was possible only with mutual respect, since the alternative way of governing under Cyrus' predecessor Nabonidus proved unsuccessful. There is no doubt that the dissatisfaction of the people with the rule of Nabonidus contributed to the peaceful conquest of Babylon, since the people were eager for change, and Cyrus propagated exactly the changes they needed. Yet, in order to maintain rule over the whole empire and establish peaceful coexistence, Cyrus had to spread the principles of his conquests and convince the peoples of the value of the changes he was bringing.

Records were a suitable means of propaganda. In the 6th century BC, carving clay cylinders was a well-known way of recording official texts. They were used to describe rulers and the living conditions created during their existence, serving the rulers as their own homage while securing respect from future generations. They were also used to convey proclamations and stories of war successes. Cyrus used this remedy for both purposes. It is believed that a few years after the conquest of Babylon and the suppression of rebellions in the newly conquered territories, Cyrus declared his power on the cylinder, preaching the story of his success and manner of rule. He stated that the god Marduk was responsible for his success, choosing him to establish a universal empire. From the very beginning, he advocated those values that were threatened during the time of his predecessor. To that end, he abolished slavery and freed the peoples who in turn glorified his name; he returned the gods to the temples and the people to their homelands; he allowed religious freedoms and tolerated cultural differences of the conquered peoples; he rebuilt the destroyed temples and provided the infrastructure for a dignified life.

The declaration was written in 45 lines on a clay cylinder, in Babylonian script. Pretty tactically, it begins by presenting Nabonidus as a person who is unfit to rule Babylonia. The following describes the unfavourable conditions of the previous reign and the wrath of the god Marduk, who led to the removal of Nabonidus and the appointment of Cyrus as universal ruler, thus justifying his military campaigns. Then the enthusiasm of the conquered peoples and the peaceful surrender of the territory to his authority were presented, thus creating the narrative of a moral being, chosen by the deity to save the oppressed peoples. In the following, peace and protection of the well-being of Babylon and its cult centres were guaranteed, thus building its own security and political stability, suppressing the people's fears of a bad future that would incite them to rebellion. Cyrus



then proclaimed the return of the gods and their believers to their dwelling places, thus bringing things back to normal and concluding that everything in the empire was in order. The concluding sentences focus on Cyrus building in Babylon, providing what the United Nations system would define as "human right to adequate housing".

Scholars have rightly pointed out that the Cyrus Cylinder belongs to the broader Mesopotamian tradition of royal inscriptions, which often served legitimising and propagandistic purposes. However, as Sander (2016) argues, what distinguishes the Cyrus Cylinder is not its form, but its content—particularly the explicit emphasis on religious tolerance, the restoration of displaced populations, and the rejection of arbitrary oppression as a governing principle. These elements signal an early articulation of restraint on sovereign power, even if framed within imperial ideology rather than individual rights.

This completed the approach to the conquered peoples and laid the foundation for a multiethnic empire. Building social cohesion through religious freedom and respect for cultural diversity have been associated with more stable forms of governance, an approach often attributed to Cyrus' rule. Although the text of the cylinder sounds quite suitable for achieving political goals, the existence of moral motives for a new system of governance that respects basic human rights, cannot be ruled out.

In addition to the Cyrus Cylinder, there are other sources that speak of its relationship to the conquered population. Gadd, Legrain and Smith (1928: 307) in their work "Royal Inscriptions" point out that Cyrus restored temples of different religious affiliations. The cylinder from the city of Ur, which is also associated with Cyrus, states that the Moon-temple was restored, and that God made it possible to conquer all four corners of the world, which is one of Cyrus' descriptions of authority as unlimited, universal rule. However, this does not lead us to conclusions about Cyrus' personal religious beliefs. The adoption of local customs was an integral part of Cyrus' conquest policy, based on a proven method of maintaining power, but also the culture to which the rulers belonged. The practice of abolishing forced labour by Mesopotamian rulers is well known, and in some cases it is noticeable even in the reign of Babylonia by the Assyrian kings, judging by their royal inscriptions resembling the Cyrus Cylinder (Streck M., 1916: 227).

The cultural aspect and ethics of these rulers are not excluded factors in the design of their policies, however we can draw conclusions based on available materials describing the needs and interests of the time. Saggs (1975: 44) states that Cyrus followed the policies of previous Assyrian rulers in terms of conquering those areas that were strategically relevant. These are regions that have been the international focus of the conflict, with populations often suffering threats to basic living needs. In these communities, Cyrus revitalized the relationship with the population, freeing them from excessive pressure of labour and duties, giving them a basis for a dignified life guaranteed by the central government. The benefits of humane policies are recognized in building the loyalty of the conquered population, as well as establishing control over politically less stable areas. According to Otzen (1979: 251), it is possible to interpret Cyrus' relationship with the Jewish community in a similar way, so that the rebuilding of Jerusalem was potentially part of a policy to establish control and stability near a politically sensitive zone, taking into account Egypt. Another reason was presented by Tadmor (1966), who



recognized the formation of a border with Arab tribes, which had already become a challenge to Cyrus' imperialist structures during the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

Regardless of the motives of Cyrus' policies, they primarily created effects on the social development of Mesopotamia, and more broadly on the development of the world. By expanding its territories and creating the world's largest empire of that time, the Achaemenid emperor Cyrus, under the auspices of one government, enabled the life of peoples who differed in language, religion and customs. Every empire came to an end, so the Achaemenid Empire was eventually overtaken by Greek civilization. However, the "first marriage" of East and West was not the result of Alexander the Great's militaristic goals solely, but the result of cultural synergies with the first Cyrus' conquests of Greek cities on the Aegean coast in the mid-6th century BC. In this regard, the creation of a "globalized world" began almost three hundred years before Hellenism, when Persian campaigns laid the foundations for future East-West relations. Oliver Potežica (2007: 9) claimed that in a broader historical perspective it is clear that ancient Persia laid the foundations for the future "building" of Hellenism, which subsequently transferred influences on the development of the Roman Empire, Byzantium, the Arab caliphate and the spread of other great cultures and religions.

Potežica (2007: 16) further states that the Achaemenid Empire helped to create peace by providing relative security to the conflicting peoples. By stopping regional attacks and looting in its territories, it has contributed to the prevention of genocide and the relative stabilization of economic development. Connecting the newly established territories enabled trade and expansion of commodity-cash flows. An additional impetus to progress was given by the development of institutions, which for the first time functioned in such a large and heterogeneous space. In this way, Cyrus laid the foundations for long-term development, but at the same time continued a well-founded policy. Cyaxares, the great grand-father of Cyrus the Great, the ruler of the Iranian Median dynasty, began absorbing different cultures as early as the 7th century BC, and focused on building social cohesion. It also decentralized the management of the newly conquered territories, giving peoples the right to local self-government. For such an idea to work, he had to ensure tolerance of cultural differences by allowing peoples to maintain their religion, culture, customs, language, administration, and even the freedom to elect local officials.

The presented way of governing is important for understanding the real significance of the Cyrus Cylinder, because it is not an unknown way of writing history with false facts, erasing crimes and inventing good deeds. However, Cyrus carried out the works carved on the cylinder throughout the reign. He rebuilt demolished houses, provided humanitarian aid, and made immodest contributions to the maintenance of shrines and temples. Cyrus presented his rule as preferable to that of his predecessor, promising improved governance and greater stability for subject populations. In practice, he curtailed several of the oppressive policies associated with the previous regime and sought to uphold the commitments articulated during his rise to power. While his authority was ultimately imposed, its consolidation unfolded with varying degrees of acceptance and resistance, shaped by regional interests and local attitudes toward changes in existing governing structures. More than two and a half millennia later, the Cyrus Cylinder was recognised by the United Nations as a document of historical



significance that illustrates inclusive approaches to governance, leading to its translation into all official languages of the organisation.

### **Human Rights *Anno Domini***

Different patterns of governance have shaped human rights over time. In Mesopotamia, almost three thousand years ago, basic human rights were respected, and their scope depended on the cultural background and interests of the rulers. In Babylon in 539 BC, a kind of declaration was created, which, under the authority of the emperor, guaranteed basic human rights in the greatest empire of that time. From Babylon, the idea of human rights was transferred to India, then spread to Greece and finally adopted in Rome. In Rome, the concept of "natural law" was developed, which is based on the premise that people behave according to unwritten laws that are the embodiment of the nature of things. Over time, the concept of human rights evolved and took concrete form in legislative instruments that would later prove fundamental. Today we are witnessing a daily struggle to respect human rights, from non-governmental organizations, through private companies, to national and multilateral institutions. Certain pieces of legislation have remained particularly important, as they have marked history with the development of what began long ago in Mesopotamia.

The transition from ancient imperial practices to medieval and modern rights instruments should not be understood as a direct historical transmission. As Pasture (2018) demonstrates, European human rights traditions were largely invented through specific political struggles, institutional conflicts, and social transformations unique to their historical context. The relevance of the Cyrus Cylinder, therefore, lies not in genealogical continuity, but in structural analogy: the emergence of norms that sought to limit arbitrary power and recognise the governed as more than mere subjects.

An important intermediary stage in the development of human rights and international legal thought can be identified in the Spanish School of Natural Law during the sixteenth century. Thinkers such as Francisco de Vitoria (1991), Francisco Suárez (2012), and Bartolomé de las Casas (1992) articulated early legal arguments concerning the inherent dignity of all human beings, the moral limits of sovereign power, and the rights of indigenous peoples. Their work challenged the legitimacy of conquest, slavery, and forced conversion, thereby contributing decisively to the emergence of principles such as universal human dignity, just war, and the foundations of modern international law.

While grounded in theological reasoning, these contributions marked a crucial transitional step between ancient normative practices and the later secular legal frameworks that would crystallize in European constitutional and human rights instruments.

In 1215, King John of England was forced to curb his exercise of authority, which was contrary to the "natural laws" of his country and the traditional English system of government. This meant stopping his continuous interference in the affairs of the church and violation of the property rights of citizens. It resulted in the signing of the Magna Carta, the content of which became analogous to the improvement of human rights regulation. It is still an accepted view that the Magna Carta, or "the Great Charter", is one of the most significant early influences on the historical processes that led to the rule



of constitutional law. Among the human rights guaranteed, stand out the rights of citizens to own and inherit property, and to be protected from excessive taxation. The principle of equality before the law was established, which was a significant step towards modern democracy.

Magna Carta did not establish religious freedom in the modern sense of individual freedom of belief or worship. Rather, its provisions concerning the “freedom of the Church” reflected the principle of *libertas ecclesiae*, aimed at limiting royal interference in ecclesiastical affairs and safeguarding the institutional autonomy of the Church (Vincent, 2012). While this concept differs fundamentally from modern notions of religious freedom or tolerance, it nevertheless represents an early attempt to restrain sovereign power through normative principles, a feature that invites cautious structural comparison with earlier governance practices such as those reflected in the Cyrus Cylinder. It should be noted that the legal recognition of religious tolerance in Europe emerged much later, most notably with the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which formalised confessional coexistence within the framework of sovereign states (Moita, 2014).

In this regard, the Great Charter listed religious freedom in the first article:

*“In the first place we grant to God and confirm by this our present charter for ourselves and our heirs in perpetuity that the English Church is to be free and to have all its rights fully and its liberties entirely. We furthermore grant and give to all the freemen of our realm for ourselves and our heirs in perpetuity the liberties written below to have and to hold them and their heirs from us and our heirs in perpetuity.” (Vincent N., 2012:1)*

Freedoms have not been limited to religion. Civil liberties were restored to the English population, analogous to the resurrection of the liberties of the conquered peoples by Cyrus the Great. As in Magna Carta, the cylinder did not clearly define the limitations of rights, but they were guaranteed by legal authority, with the cylinder having para-legal effect through state power, while Magna Carta had clear legal effect and was a prototype of a constitution that limits state power. However, some effects were similar, and this is illustrated by the ninth article of this historical document: “The City of London is to have all its ancient liberties and customs. Moreover, we wish and grant that all other cities and boroughs and vills and the barons of the Cinque Ports and all ports are to have all their liberties and free customs.” (Ibid, 2)

An additional similarity is reflected in the part of the prohibition of exile, which according to the content of the cylinder mainly refers to exile for religious reasons, which served to destroy cults and restrain religious freedoms. Magna Carta did not limit itself in this way, but generally banned exile, basing its rationality on property rights. Article 29 clearly indicates this: “No freeman is to be taken or imprisoned or disseised of his free tenement or of his liberties or free customs, or outlawed or exiled or in any way ruined, nor will we go against such a man or send against him save by lawful judgement of his peers or by the law of the land.” (Ibid, 4)

The differences between the two observed documents are reflected in the existence of property rights, which were not realized under the rule of Cyrus, while being one of the



key elements guaranteed by King John. Cyrus established a caste system, an economic system that in many ways resembled feudalism, where all the property of the empire belonged to one ruler. However, it is necessary to understand that the time difference is enormous, which tells us that the conditions under which these rights were exercised varied greatly. Nevertheless, while no direct historical transmission can be established, the Magna Carta may be understood as reflecting governance principles structurally analogous to those articulated in the Cyrus Cylinder, particularly with regard to restraints on sovereign power and the protection of certain fundamental liberties. Similar normative ideas continued to reappear in European legal and constitutional thought in the centuries that followed.

About five centuries later, in 1776, the United States Declaration of Independence was enacted. Its primary author, Thomas Jefferson, wrote the declaration as an act of gaining independence from Great Britain. The Declaration of Independence basically guaranteed individual rights, which is one of the features of Cyrus' rule, if we look at individual rights to freedom of religion and cultural identity. What is particularly interesting is that Jefferson used the Cyrus' mode of government for the establishment and organization of the United States. The principle of religious tolerance in a state of diverse cultures has become a model for the founding fathers. During the Enlightenment period, Herodotus' book "Cyropaedia" became popular literature among European and American political thinkers. Cyropaedia is now part of not only the Library of the US Congress, but a copy is on display at the Freer and Sackler Galleries at the National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, D.C., as a tribute to Jefferson's devotion to the book. According to Massumeh Farhad, Freer and Sackler's chief curator, Jefferson researched in detail the teachings of Cyrus the Great and the principles of his reign, and was so attracted to his philosophy of government that he advised his family to read it. (Dabashi Hamid, 2015: 13)

Twelve years later, in 1788, the Constitution of the United States was ratified. It is a fundamental law that regulates the federal system of government, defines the jurisdiction of the principal organs of government. In this respect, it is the oldest national constitution still in use. Unlike Cyrus, who had absolute power, the Constitution clearly defines the scope of power of all branches of government. Both documents guaranteed the basic rights of citizens, with the Constitution granting significantly greater rights in a democratic system, while Cyrus had the power to change the scope of civil rights depending on the current interest. Despite his autocratic rule, Cyrus formed institutions that stabilized the legal, economic, and social life of diverse cultures in the common territory. The system of governance included a judicial council, and regional governors, satraps, which resembled the governors of the United States. Both countries had one leader, with Cyrus being above the other branches of government, to which he himself gave authority.

A year later, in 1789, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen was adopted in France. It was the first step towards the preparation of the constitution of the newly established French Republic. It guaranteed fundamental freedoms that were considered natural and therefore universal, thus ensuring the equality of people in fundamental rights. This is the first parallel with the cylinder, which Cyrus used to propagate the universal principles of his rule as king of the "four quarters of the world". Parallels are further found in the provision of fundamental rights: "No man ought to be molested on



account of his opinions, not even on account of his religious opinions, provided his avowal of them does not disturb the public order established by law.” (Warman Caroline, 2016)

Three years after the adoption of the Constitution of the United States, in 1791, the Bill of Rights was ratified, which protects the basic freedoms of US citizens. It represents the first ten amendments to the Constitution, which sought to limit the power of the federal government and protect citizens from the state. In this respect Cyrus had no similar intentions, for he did not limit his power nor share it. But the concept is similar, as it refers to the protection of religious freedom, with the fact that the Bill of Rights also included the freedom of speech, carrying weapons, the freedom of assembly and the freedom to petition. The similarity is evident in the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” (US Congress, 1791)

Additional consistency is evident in the Thirteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1865. It refers to the abolition of slavery and forced labour: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” (US Congress, 1865)

Less than a hundred years later, on December 10, 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To prevent the atrocities of the World War Two from repeating, the international community decided to complement the UN Charter with a roadmap that would guarantee the rights of every individual in the world. The reliance of human rights legislation on historical strongholds was shown by the Assembly, which transmitted the draft to the Economic and Social Council for “reference to the Commission on Human Rights for consideration... in its preparation of an international bill of rights”. The Commission was made up of 18 delegates of different political, cultural and religious identities, the first symbol of the universality of human rights advocated by world leaders.

Eleanor Roosevelt, chairman of the Human Rights Commission which drafted the document, referred to the declaration as the international Magna Carta for all mankind. The Declaration reflects governance principles that, in a different historical context, echo certain normative concerns also present in the text engraved on the Cyrus Cylinder. They refer to the human sufferings of the Babylonians and other peoples under the rule of Nabonidus, and to the sufferings of the people in World War Two.

In its preamble and in Article 1, the Declaration unequivocally proclaims the inherent rights of all human beings: “Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people...All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” (Draft Committee, 1949:2)

At this point, a clear conceptual distinction must be drawn. The universality proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights refers to individual rights grounded in legal equality and applicability beyond political or imperial membership. In contrast, in ancient imperial contexts, such as the Babylonian, Achaemenid, or Roman empires, recognition of certain protections was typically embedded in the status of subjects within an imperial



order rather than grounded in individual legal equality. While the Achaemenid system displayed moderately inclusive and pluralistic governance practices, these protections nevertheless remained contingent on imperial authority and did not constitute universal rights in the modern legal sense. Accordingly, the term “human rights” is not used here in the same legal sense as in the 1948 Universal Declaration, but as a historically qualified analytical category that reflects earlier, context-bound approaches to limiting power and regulating governance.

While the Cyrus Cylinder should not be understood as a universal declaration in legal terms, it represents an imperial proclamation issued under the authority of a single ruler and addressed to a diverse population. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on the other hand, was at the time written and adopted by 58 members of the world organization. To date, all 192 members of the UN system have adopted this historic document.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights itself was not the product of moral consensus alone, but of intense political negotiation. As Justo (2025) illustrates, the language of universality embedded in the Declaration emerged through compromises between competing ideological, cultural, and geopolitical interests. This reinforces the argument that human rights are historically constructed rather than naturally given—an insight that further legitimises examining ancient texts like the Cyrus Cylinder as part of a broader, evolving normative landscape rather than as isolated anomalies.

Similarities with the Cyrus Cylinder are evident in numerous articles of the declaration. The second article already mentions the universality of human rights, making them independent of religious affiliation or cultural identity.

“Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” (Ibid)

The following article sets out the right to life, liberty and security. Considering that Cyrus pursued policies aimed at integrating diverse populations and reducing certain forms of coercion, it is possible to identify broadly comparable themes in these declarations.

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” (Ibid) Slavery is specifically mentioned in the UN Declaration, in Article 4: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” (Ibid)

Exile is also explicitly prohibited, in Article 9, which reminds us of the ban on forced migration of Jews and other peoples from their homelands: “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.” (Ibid, 3)

Not all articles in these declarations are analogous. Cyrus allowed diverse cultural identities, but all peoples belonged to one state, the Persian Empire. In contrast, the UN Declaration guarantees the right to nationality: “Everyone has the right to a nationality. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.” (Ibid, 4)

The differences are also obvious in terms of property rights. While this right was jeopardized under Cyrus' rule, the UN Declaration cites it as one of the basic human



rights: "Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property." (Ibid, 5)

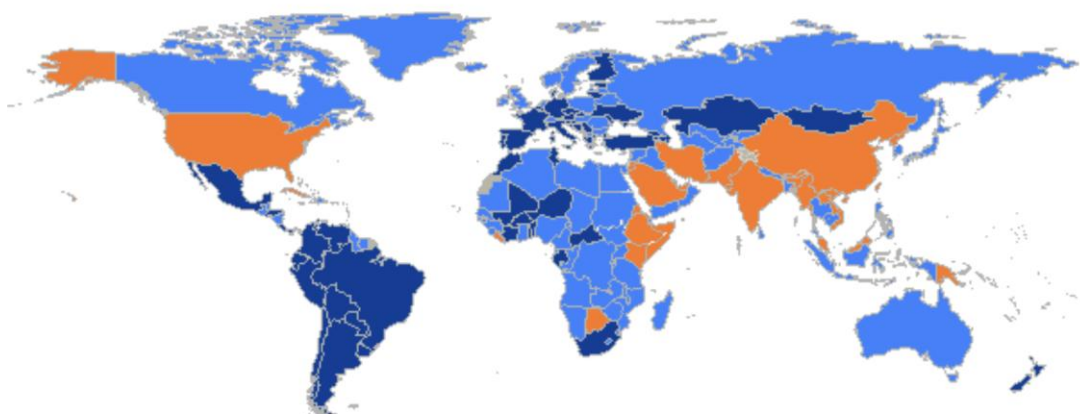
The right to religious affiliation is also part of Article 18. The analogy of this article is that it explicitly states the right to religious practice and worship, which in the 6th century BC was one of the greatest advances in the development of human rights: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." (Ibid, 5)

Lastly, common elements are evident in the governance model. Although Cyrus centralized power, he decentralized governance. He appointed satraps, local and regional rulers, who were elected by the residents. In a similar way, this right is defined in Article 21: "Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives." (Ibid, 5)

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has influenced the development of new international legislation governing human rights worldwide. Today, there are eighteen major international human rights treaties, which are recognized as "The Core International Human Rights Instruments and their monitoring bodies". The status of their ratification in 2026 is presented in the following figure.

The creation of this map was a process two and a half thousand years long. It used to look more modest on a global scale. However, at the national level, the size of the Persian Empire was impressive, which is why the Cyrus Cylinder was once also a "universal" declaration, as it can be inferred from the figure below.

**Figure 1.** Ratification of 18 International Human Rights Treaties



Status of Ratifications  
15-18 10-14 5-9 0-4

Source: UNOHCHR (2026), *Status of ratification*, UNOHCHR



In the 21st century, the development of human rights remains a map whose borders continue to shift. In the face of ongoing human rights violations, the significance of the Cyrus Cylinder persists as a historical reference point illustrating early normative ideas about human dignity and freedom. While Cyrus' rule should not be idealized and warrants careful critical assessment, the Cyrus Cylinder can be understood as a relevant historical declaration that, within its specific context, reflected an early approach to governance focused on administrative order and the regulation of power within a multiethnic empire.

**Figure 2.** Achaemenid Empire during the reign of Cyrus the Great, 559-530 BC



Source: Van der Crabben (2012), *Empire of Cyrus the Great*, World History Encyclopedia

## Conclusions

The results of the research suggest the existence of thematic and conceptual parallels between the Cyrus Cylinder and later human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A common objection to framing the Cyrus Cylinder as a cornerstone of human rights is that it lacks the legal universality, enforceability, and individual focus characteristic of modern rights regimes. This objection is valid. Yet, as this analysis has shown, the significance of the Cyrus Cylinder does not lie in its conformity to modern standards, but in its early articulation of governance principles based on tolerance, restraint, and respect for human dignity. In this sense, it represents not the origin of human rights law, but an enduring reference point in the long historical process through which the idea of human rights was constructed. This interpretation reflects an ongoing scholarly debate and does not presume a direct or linear historical influence between ancient imperial practices and modern human rights law.

Research demonstrates that human rights are not a social innovation of Cyrus the Great, but are a continuation of the well-founded practice of the Achaemenid imperialism. Cyrus's policies reflected established Achaemenid approaches to imperial governance, which sought to accommodate religious plurality, cultural diversity, and local customs,



albeit without constituting rights in the modern democratic or legal sense. Their founding through the Declaration in the Old Age, as well as their legal empowerment through agreements and treaties in the coming millennia, highlights the importance of historical heritage in the fight for basic human rights. While Cyrus's policies clearly reflect political pragmatism aimed at maintaining peace and stability among diverse peoples, they also reveal a moral vision in his approach to governance. By balancing practical governance with a philosophy of respect and tolerance, Cyrus articulated governance principles that resonate with later human rights discourses, both political and ethical.

The conclusions drawn from the research indicate that even in the 21st century, the Cyrus Cylinder continues to function as a symbolic reference point in contemporary human rights discourse, used by national governments, international organizations, academic institutions, and citizens. In this way, the declaration engraved in a cylinder from the 6th century BC came to inform later interpretations of human rights concepts, through which the ancient Achaemenid Empire influenced the development of future civilizations. The Cyrus Cylinder acted as a declaration that spread to all regions of the empire, propagating a philosophy of rights that transcended individual cultures and laid the groundwork for a shared understanding of human rights across diverse peoples. For these reasons, it is understandable why the United Nations system has interpreted the Cyrus Cylinder as a symbolic cornerstone in the historical development of human rights, situating it within a broader and evolving normative tradition that culminated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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