

The British Museum in association with Iran Heritage Foundation present

# Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia

with generous loans from The National Museum of Iran

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**9 September 2005- 8 January 2006    Room 5**  
**Admission £8, concessionary rates available**

The wealth and splendour of Ancient Persia is to be revealed in a major new exhibition opening at the British Museum in September 2005. This is the BP special exhibition 2005. Between 550 BC and 330 BC, the Persians ruled over the largest empire of the Ancient Near East seen before or since which stretched from North Africa to the Indus Valley and from Central Asia to the Persian Gulf. Persian rulers Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes established highly sophisticated networks of power, initiated far-reaching legislation, and created monumental architecture. Drawing from oriental sources rather than classical texts, the British Museum will shed new light on the forgotten empire of Ancient Persia while challenging the myths that have portrayed the Persians as despotic and ruthless people. By unlocking the secrets of Ancient Persia, the exhibition aims to promote a greater understanding of the current issues at the heart of the Middle East today.

Many of the artefacts in the exhibition will come on loan from the National Museum of Iran and the Persepolis museum, and will be seen in the UK for the first time ever. Loans from the Louvre museum will supplement the British Museum's own significant and important collection which includes the magnificent Oxus Treasure.

This exhibition will focus on the Ancient Persian empire at the height of its glory. Statues of Darius and iconic objects linked to Cyrus and Xerxes will be on display, testaments to the power of the Great King. The awe-inspiring scale of the palaces at Persepolis and Susa will be suggested by the display of monumental architectural pieces including ornate carved stone slabs depicting Ancient Persian priests, servants and tributaries. The immense wealth of the empire will be visible in the lavish tableware commissioned by the Persian kings, including intricately carved gold and silver bowls, horn shaped drinking cups and polished stone trays, and in the dazzling jewellery from the imperial capitals at Pasargadae and Susa. This luxury in life extended into death and examples of ornate gold grave goods will also be on display.

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The exhibition will examine the startlingly modern innovations of the Persian kings which helped them to control their empire, including a system of devolved administration and government, a complex road network and an imperial postal service that ran from Sardis to Susa. It will also focus on Ancient Persian warfare, the Great King's display of military force will be shown through impressive representations of Persian Guardsmen on numerous stone reliefs and casts. The extraordinary expansion of the empire – particularly under Darius (522 – 486 BC) - will be illustrated through objects which are witness to the interface with the distant corners of the empire such as Egypt, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Greece.

The fall of Persepolis to Alexander the Great in 331BC symbolised the destruction of the Ancient Persian empire, but Persian forms of governance lived on, not least in Alexander himself who adopted many elements of Persian rule, a clear indication of the solidity of the construction of the empire. The legacy of the Persian kings is examined in the final section of the exhibition which will feature the famous Cyrus Cylinder, sometimes referred to as the first declaration of human rights because of its reference to religious toleration.

**For further information and images please contact Alex Robat on 020 7936 1296, email [arobat@brunswickgroup.com](mailto:arobat@brunswickgroup.com) or Hannah Boulton on 020 7323 8522, email [hboulton@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](mailto:hboulton@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk)**

### **Notes to Editors:**

- The exhibition is curated by John Curtis, the Keeper of the Ancient Near East department at the British Museum.
- The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue edited by John Curtis and Nigel Tallis, published by British Museum Press. Priced £25 it will be available from September 2005.
- A full education programme will accompany the exhibition. Special lectures, including a talk by Tom Holland, bestselling author of *Rubicon*, on his new book *Persian Fire The First World Empire and the Battle for the West*, (Little, Brown £20, published on September 8th) on October 27, a Persian Family Day of free interactive events on 5 November and an evening of Persian poetry and song on 16 December. Gallery talks, workshops and a film season are also scheduled. For further information please contact the press office.
- BP is the British Museum's largest and most longstanding corporate sponsor, supporting the Museum on an annual basis since 1998. Since 2003, BP has been the major exhibition sponsor at the British Museum. Most recently, BP supported *Mummy: the inside story*, which has received record visitor figures and unparalleled acclaim for the use of innovative technology and design interpretation.
- The Iran Heritage Foundation is a non-political UK registered charity founded in 1995, with the mission to increase awareness about, promote and preserve the history, languages and cultures of Iran. The objectives of the Foundation are pursued by means of organising and supporting research, publication, and diverse activities of cultural or scholarly merit in a variety of related fields, on a worldwide basis. The Foundation interprets its remit generously and initiates a wide range of programmes intended to provide a forum to facilitate not only the study of Iran's culture both among students and the wider academic community but also to present all aspects of Persian culture (ancient and modern) to the public at large. **[www.iranheritage.org](http://www.iranheritage.org)**