

BBC Learning English
6 Minute English
King Cyrus' Cylinder

NB: This is not a word for word transcript



Yvonne: Hello, I'm Yvonne Archer, this is 6 Minute English and thanks to Alice for joining me today.

Alice: Hi Yvonne.

Yvonne: Hello Alice. Now recently, **an artefact** - a very old piece of art - which many historians regard as the world's first ever **human rights charter** was on loan for a while from the British Museum to the National Iranian Museum in Tehran.

Alice: Very interesting.

Yvonne: It is, and it's small, it's made of clay and is **a cylindrical shape**. And the Cyrus Cylinder, as it's often called, is two and a half thousand years old!

Alice: That's very old. Is it still in perfect shape?

Yvonne: I think it is, yes. But before we find out more, you'd better answer today's question, Alice.

Alice: OK - I'm ready and waiting.

Yvonne: Very good. Which country does the British Museum's oldest artefact come from?

- a) Benin
- b) Iraq or
- c) Tanzania

Alice: I've got no idea - so I'm going to guess ...Tanzania.

Yvonne: OK. And I'll tell you whether you're right or wrong later on in today's "6 Minute English". King Cyrus of Persia, now Iran, ordered the cylinder to be **inscribed** way back in 539 BC. Alice, can you explain how an inscription is different from writing for us, please?

Alice: Sure. When we write, it's usually on the surface of something with ink - or with graphite if we're using a pencil. But King Cyrus's words were 'inscribed', so they were engraved - or carved - into the surface of the cylinder. And we can actually feel the writing with our fingers if we touch the inscription, not just look at it.

Yvonne: And here's BBC Front Row presenter, John Wilson, to tell us what is inscribed on the Cyrus Cylinder:

Insert 1: John Wilson, BBC Front Row

This object records how he liberated the city of Babylon from tyranny, how he freed and repatriated enslaved people. And how he decreed that all the people of Babylon should be allowed to practice their own religion and culture.

Yvonne: The little clay object records - or tells us - how King Cyrus liberated the city of Babylon from **tyranny**. Now there's a word we don't hear too often! Alice, can you explain what is 'tyranny' is for us, please?

Alice: Well, 'tyranny' is a type of behaviour that is cruel, oppressive and very unfair. For example, we might hear a dictator described as 'tyrannical'. So freeing the city of Babylon from tyranny is generally thought to have been a good thing.

Yvonne: As we heard, King Cyrus freed the enslaved people and sent them back to their homes - he **repatriated** them. And what about that word '**decreed**' - that's another old fashioned and rather formal word, isn't it?

Alice: Yes, it is. If a ruler decrees something, he or she makes it officially known that it is now law. And King Cyrus of Persia decreed that people should be allowed to practice their own religion and culture.

Yvonne: The cylinder was on display in Tehran for about seven months and during that time, about two million people went to see it. Here's what one **exhibition** visitor told John Wilson about the artefact:

Insert 2: Woman in National Iranian Museum and John Wilson

Woman: Iran was the centre of the world so many years ago but nowadays, we're left apart. In our schools and universities, they don't talk about these things.

John Wilson: Because it's part of the pre-Islamic history?

Woman: Yeah.

Yvonne: The woman says that Iran was the centre of the world many years ago.

Alice: So in her view, at one point, Iran was the most important country in the world.

Yvonne: Mm. She says they don't talk about things like the Cyrus Cylinder in schools or universities in Iran because it's an object from a time when the country wasn't yet the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Alice: Yes, as she puts it, it's part of their **pre-Islamic history**, which isn't often talked about.

Yvonne: Well, despite the fact that Britain and Iran don't **engage** much politically, they were able to agree on this exhibition after some discussion. As Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum explains, that has been important:

Insert 3 – Neil MacGregor, Director, British Museum

In this context there have been conversations between British diplomats and Iranian diplomats about human rights. So the exhibition itself doesn't address these big issues of the relationship, what it does do is create a space in which difficult conversations can take place.

Yvonne: OK Alice, it's time to answer today's question! Which country does the British Museum's oldest artefact come from?

Alice: And I said Tanzania.

Yvonne: And you were right! Hey!

Alice: Incredible. Pure luck! How old is it?

Yvonne: It's actually 1.8 million years old, and it's a stone tool that was made by man. Now as your reward, Alice, you get to remind us of some of today's language.

Alice: With pleasure:

an artefact

inscribed

tyranny

repatriated

exhibition

Yvonne: Now that's all we've got time for - but do join us again soon for more "6 Minute English".

Both: Goodbye!

Vocabulary and definitions

an artefact	a very old piece of art or an object made by humans
human rights charter	legal document which says how people must be treated by governments and each other
a cylindrical shape	something with fairly flat, circular ends and longer straight sides
inscribed	writing which is cut into the surface of something so that it is permanent
tyranny	cruel, oppressive treatment of people by their leaders
repatriated	sent back to their own countries
decreed	officially announced
exhibition	display of a group of objects or art in a public place
pre-Islamic history	here, events which happened in Iran before the country became an Islamic state
engage	interact, talk to each other, discuss

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