In the Classical tradition, Cyrus the Great’s defeat of the Medes (c. 550 BCE) in northern Iran, and with it the foundation of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, is inextricably linked with the legends of Cyrus’ birth and upbringing. Extant sources, however, reveal surprising disparities in the particulars of his parentage. These disparities – ranging from Cyrus as the son of Cambyses and the Median princess Mandane (from Herodotus) to Cyrus as the son of Atradas the bandit and Argoste the goat-herder (from Ctesias) – provide insight both into Cyrus’ conquests as well as his political program.