



From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire

Pierre Briant

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Around 550 B.C.E. the Persian people--who were previously practically unknown in the annals of history--emerged from their base in southern Iran (Fars) and engaged in a monumental adventure that, under the leadership of Cyrus the Great and his successors, culminated in the creation of an immense Empire that stretched from central Asia to Upper Egypt, from the Indus to the Danube. The Persian (or Achaemenid, named for its reigning dynasty) Empire assimilated an astonishing diversity of lands, peoples, languages, and cultures. This conquest of Near Eastern lands completely altered the history of the world: for the first time, a monolithic State as vast as the future Roman Empire arose, expanded, and matured in the course of more than two centuries (530-330) and endured until the death of Alexander the Great (323), who from a geopolitical perspective was "the last of the Achaemenids." Even today, the remains of the Empire--the terraces, palaces, reliefs, paintings, and enameled bricks of Pasargadae, Persepolis, and Susa; the impressive royal tombs of Naqsh-i Rustam; the monumental statue of Darius the Great--serve to remind visitors of the power and unprecedented luxury of the Great Kings and their loyal courtiers (the "Faithful Ones").

Though long eclipsed and overshadowed by the towering prestige of the "ancient Orient" and "eternal Greece," Achaemenid history has emerged into fresh light during the last two decades. Freed from the tattered rags of "Oriental decadence" and "Asiatic stagnation," research has also benefited from a continually growing number of discoveries that have provided important new evidence--including texts, as well as archaeological, numismatic, and iconographic artifacts.

The evidence that this book assembles is voluminous and diverse: the citations of ancient documents and of the archaeological evidence permit the reader to follow the author in his role as a historian who, across space and time, attempts to understand how such an Empire emerged, developed, and faded. Though firmly grounded in the evidence, the author's discussions do not avoid persistent questions and regularly engages divergent interpretations and alternative hypotheses. This book is without precedent or equivalent, and also offers an exhaustive bibliography and thorough indexes.

The French publication of this magisterial work in 1996 was acclaimed in newspapers and literary journals. Now *Histoire de l'Empire Perse: De Cyrus à Alexandre* is translated in its entirety in a revised edition, with the author himself reviewing the translation, correcting the original edition, and adding new documentation.

Pierre Briant, Chaire Histoire et civilisation du monde achéménide et de l'empire d'Alexandre, Collège de France, is a specialist in the history of the Near East during the era of the Persian Empire and the conquests of Alexander. He is the author of numerous books.

Peter T. Daniels, the translator, is an independent scholar, editor, and translator who studied at Cornell University and the University of Chicago. He lives and works in New York City.

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Dave Van Es says

This book is above my level of understanding at this time. I am going to start a less complicated history of the Persian Empire in the hope to move up to this book within the next 6 months or so.

Barbara Sydow says

First of all, here are my (picky) complaints: This book would benefit greatly from another round of editing. I'm not sure if the translation is partially at fault, but I found it to be strangely organized, and full of typos and odd layout decisions. Sometimes a figure would appear pages from where it was referenced. Some figures didn't seem to have been referenced at all, which was confusing. And sometimes the author would describe things in detail (palaces, stelae, coins) and then not include a figure that would have been helpful. That could be a licensing issue, but it was rather frustrating. The organization was also confusing. The book starts with early Persian history, and focuses on the first two or three rulers, so I was expecting the author to just work his way through the history chronologically. He then, however goes off on a 400 page tangent describing customs/religion/tax policies, etc. over the course of the entire history of the empire, jumping back and forth in time between rulers. It just seems like an ironic decision considering how much time he spends complaining about Herodotus' digressions. He then eventually goes back to the chronological layout, and the book ends with the final rulers of the empire before its fall.

All these editorial/design problems aside, it was extremely informative, and about as entertaining as a thousand-page textbook about the Persian empire could be. He has a good sense of humor and includes plenty of fascinating anecdotes about daily life of the rulers and the soldiers, and he really manages to cover a lot of territory (no pun intended). I was a classics major in college and had of course focused on Greek and Roman history; the Persians were only ever described tangentially, and always as aggressors. I wanted a book to fill my knowledge gaps regarding this part of the world, and this book was just what I was looking for. I'd highly recommend it for anyone interested in an in-depth review of the ancient middle east.

Bryn Hammond says

Acknowledged daddy of the Persian-perspective historians.

Farzad says

More information in here than I could possibly dig through in the borrowed time I had with this book. Will procure this tome sometime soon.
