



## **Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West**

*Tom Holland*

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In 480 B.C., Xerxes, the King of Persia, led an invasion of mainland Greece. Its success should have been a formality. For seventy years, victory—rapid, spectacular victory—had seemed the birthright of the Persian Empire. In the space of a single generation, they had swept across the Near East, shattering ancient kingdoms, storming famous cities, putting together an empire which stretched from India to the shores of the Aegean. As a result of those conquests, Xerxes ruled as the most powerful man on the planet. Yet somehow, astonishingly, against the largest expeditionary force ever assembled, the Greeks of the mainland managed to hold out. The Persians were turned back. Greece remained free. Had the Greeks been defeated in the epochal naval battle at Salamis, not only would the West have lost its first struggle for independence and survival, but it is unlikely that there would ever have been such an entity as the West at all.

Tom Holland's brilliant new book describes the very first "clash of Empires" between East and West. As he did in the critically praised *Rubicon*, he has found extraordinary parallels between the ancient world and our own. There is no other popular history that takes in the entire sweep of the Persian Wars, and no other classical historian, academic or popular, who combines scholarly rigor with novelistic depth with a worldly irony in quite the fashion that Tom Holland does.

## **Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West Details**

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Tom Holland**

# From Reader Review Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West for online ebook

## Arun Divakar says

Sometimes at the most drowsy of moments spent on musing about history, I see the whole picture as a rise and fall of global powers. A number of races, faiths and faces have all struggled for domination over the planet and when looked at from the longer term, every single one of them have failed. Knowing that it is futile, why do men and women struggle for this momentary blaze of glory ? Swords, spears, shields, horses, elephants, men, muskets, bayonets and rifles...no matter what the weapons, the empires built on them never survive for too long. Look back for a moment at these : The Persians, The Greeks, The Romans, The Egyptians, France, Holland, Russia, England, Germany, the USA. How many of them are global super powers now ? Forget being super powers, a nation like Greece was washed out and went bankrupt. A few centuries ago this nation was the crown jewel of classical civilization and a few months ago it was struggling to stay afloat.

Reading history against this background makes everything look rather bleak and yet we go on hoping that there just might be a chance for a light at the end of the tunnel. The Persians were the pioneers in one aspect : a concept that a war and subjugation of other lands in the name of a god was morally justified. Centuries later this one notion they gave birth to still survives and even thrives in forms that are too monstrous to comprehend.

This book is supposed to be a work of non-fiction (but in reality it reads faster than fiction !) that tells us about the rise of Persia, the skirmishes for the control of Greece and finally how Greece (Athens & Sparta notably) routed the Persians and retained their independence. These were landmark battles that led to the rise of a Western civilization and hence responsible for the shape our present world is in today. The rise of Persian emperors : Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes forms the first half of the story and makes for rather fascinating reading. In a sequence of bloody battles, subterfuges, espionage and blind luck these three men gave rise to the biggest empire of the ancient world. There was one other stand-out factor that made Persia a true winner in the world of then. They were masters of information and espionage and through the innovative use of their information channels, the emperor was never too far away from the action. The Persian treasuries were filled to overflowing and this made their military might all the more overwhelming. Against this was pitted the tiny states of Greece who by no means were united. The Spartans with their supremely effective soldiers and Athens with its wish to be prominent in the Greek scene both stood against Persia's ambitions beyond the Aegean. There were others in the fray too but the alliances they all maintained were all flimsy, treacherous and bound to fail.

And so were born the legends : Of Leonidas and his 300 men who defied a million Persians at the pass of Thermopylae and of the Battle of Salamis which proved to be an unbelievable victory for the Greeks. Tom Holland sets a scorching pace for the book and makes sure he follows it up fully during the course of the book. The battles : Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis are captured with all their blood, gore and brutality as in military fiction. The Spartans – while they certainly were nothing like Gerard Butler and his men were still badass !

I did happen to come across a few reviews who pointed out historical inaccuracies here and there but for a layman like me this book left me with a level of understanding of the Greco-Persian wars that I was lacking before. Recommended !

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## Siria says

I picked this up because although three years of a degree in Ancient History mean that I know the history of this conflict quite thoroughly from the Greek side, I think I'm less informed about it from the Persian point of view. I'm not sure that this did an awful lot to correct that—while the early part of the book does discuss the Persian Empire, Holland focuses much more on Greece and a recounting of the battles than he does on Persia. I would have loved a deeper cultural analysis of what happened on both sides, and I think some deeper questioning in general would have served the book much better. While I obviously wasn't able to pick out if he was making any assumptions or false assertions with regards to Persian history, there were moments where Holland stated a theory as unquestioned fact—the Doric invasion of Greece, for example—and that made me raise an eyebrow and regard this narrative as much more untrustworthy than I would otherwise have done. Readable, though.

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## Sean DeLauder says

The title of this book would lead a reader (this reader, anyway) to believe the focus to be the Achaemenid Empire and its leading men, Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes, leading up to and through the clash between Persia and Greece. That assertion is an error of scope, as Holland looks not only at the rise of Persia, but that of *all* the major players (e.g., Persia, Sparta, Athens, etc.) in characteristic thrifty but efficient detail, which was much more than I expected--so much the better.

Persian Fire corroborated much of the information about the Achaemenid Empire Gore Vidal provided in Creation. This duplication, coupled with the abundance of sources (though largely 20th century), seems an indication that the information is well established, it's simply overlooked as part of a grade school education of the period. Notably, the most prominent Greeks as fractious, greedy, and overconfident; not that that isn't characteristic of most peoples, only that it contrasts with the cursory lay education most receive on the topic. The bulk of Greek history consists of Spartans Strong (like USA!); Athenians Philosophical (like founding fathers!); Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns; the Parthenon (made of columns!); Zeus; the like, *et al.*

The most enjoyable aspect of an education is when an important historical event one has accepted (suspected, perhaps, but never had the sense or resources to investigate), has in truth been falsely represented or unduly oversimplified, and is at last exposed as a fallacy.

My favorite example of a shattered illusion is the unprecedented beginning of the West's cherished Democracy and the halcyon Greek period that bore it. In Holland's work, Democracy is presented less as a philosophical belief that the common man should have some say in the form of their government rather than the aristocracy, or that positions of authority ought not be exclusive to inheritance, all of which arose as a consequence of Greek philosophers gathering to determine the most equitable method of rule. Instead, it came about as a means for one aristocratic family to wrest power away from another at the cost of the inability for anyone to maintain absolute power. It was a brilliant and elaborate stroke, but invariably one brought about by, as Holland implies, the spite of an out-of-favor aristocratic family.

Naturally, the citizens of Athens enthusiastically supported the proposal that they would be allowed to help decide the rules of their society, they rebelled in the streets when Cleisthenes, who gave the power to vote on

laws to the people, was chased from the city by a "tyrant" (a form of monarch, though rarely of the disposition that lends to the modern definition of tyranny), who in turn found themselves faced with the power of the mob.

Similar anecdotes are strung through Holland's works, creating a tapestry of interwoven events from which he often extrapolates the thoughts, feelings, and ambitions of the characters in these histories. It is a style that may seem somewhat dishonest without supporting text, and is probably the point where he takes the greatest creative license, but at the same time makes the historical figures more than empty-eyed marble busts or rigid profiles on coins, is extremely engaging, and makes sense in the context provided.

I believe Holland is in the same league as Pulitzer Prize Winner David McCullough in terms of narrative skill, with an ability to draw a reader into a historical period through the details they choose to include and elaborate upon. The difference between the two, thus far, is McCullough (an American author) tends to focus on American (i.e., USA) history, while Holland (an English author) spends his time on ancient civilizations.

Holland began his writing career as an author of supernatural fiction. He has since turned his English acumen toward bringing history to vibrant life, and he's clearly made the right move for his career, and, more importantly, my enlightenment.

I still have two more Holland historical works to read, but I'm enthused by the prospect that, according to his current pace of publication, we should be getting a new Holland work in the next year. I look forward to continuing the process of adulthood re-education.

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### **Marcus says**

I think that merits of this book need to be judged from two rather different perspectives. Seen from purely literary point of view, 'Persian Fire' is an excellent book. Holland's writing style is both rich and engaging. What's maybe even more important, he makes all those historical figures come alive. If the book was a pure work of fiction, I probably wouldn't be able to stop prizes Mr. Holland's amazing gift of story-telling.

The thing is though that this is not work of fiction, but retelling of historical events. What's more important, those events took place long, long time ago and we really don't have a lot of primary, or even secondary sources that tell us what exactly happened. Therein lies a huge problem - the simple fact is that we know very little about the conflict between Persia and Greek city-states. This means that as soon as we move beyond most basic facts, we move into realm of speculation. At the same time, the very secure tone of Tom Holland's prose, his unquestioning and definite presentation of events, thoughts, motivations of both individuals and entire nations can easily give the impression that the picture he paints in 'Persian Fire' is what really happened. This is a rather dangerous way to present historical events.

Nevertheless, even if the story weaved by Mr. Holland consists to a large degree of speculations and educated guesses, it is undeniable that he presents a rather compelling and plausible story. Based on that merit alone, I can heartily recommend 'Persian Fire' to anyone interested in the history of the period.

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### **Ali Khan says**

I must say that this book was really disappointing for me as I was, judging from the title, excitedly expecting a historical narrative of the first Persian Empire. The title was, however, misleading, to say the least.

The book starts with a rather hasty overview of Persian empire's background and even with the clever and very interesting insertions of anecdotes, one cannot but feel that the pace is forced. Cyrus the Great gets a decent but short description and his two sons are mentioned in the passing in not very glorious terms. Darius reign again is pushed through (with excellent anecdotes and conjectural musings) and we are led to the times of Xerxes but to the king's reign. That ends the Persian Empire and thus far my short summary above would bravely rival the book in details.

Rest of the book, the main bulk of it, is primarily the history of Xerxes' war with the Greeks on land and sea **FROM THE GREEK PERSPECTIVE**. The Persians are, henceforth, mainly referred to as 'savages' (as they are called by the Greeks) and we are told only about the palatial war tents, luxuries and depletion of the ranks of the Persian side while Greeks cities, their individual legends, genealogies and ancestries, war machine and readiness, strategy, tactics and even minutes acts of bravery and valor are recorded in great details. Even when Xerxes leaves the area, the book is reluctant to move with him to the Persian lands and dwells on Greece even more so that Greek cities politics and rivalries are assiduously documented. I was not reading this book for that.

Furthermore, the book, while discussing the War, read so much like the two installments of the "300" Movies. Especially, as in the second movie where the Persians are never shown to kill or even fight but just to get killed, drowned and burn, I noticed that this book also almost never depicts the Persians killing anyone. The episode where Spartan king is defending the narrow pass with (a lot more than) 300 men for days on end, the active combat from dawn till dusk never mentions how many casualties were suffered by them while the deaths of the Greeks are told in gruesome details where the Persians, almost always, are shown to be pushed forward under a threat to be killed if returned.

These accounts might or might be true (at times minute by minute details of a raging battle that took place so long ago are hard to digest) but the way they are painted and presented were not to my poor and wanting taste. Apparently, the Persian sources of the War are not that detailed and most of the accounts must have been borrowed from the contemporary or near-contemporary Greek sources, who are, incidentally, often depicted in the book as excelling each other in fabricating false ancestries and appropriating outlandish mythical and war-like qualities, therefore, it would have been prudent to treat the accounts with a little more caution. In the end, the book merely felt like a ruse to force Greek history on readers who were expecting Persian chronicles.

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### **Stoyan Stoyanov says**

This book is a truly remarkable achievement. On one hand, it is genuine, unadulterated history... no fiction about it. On the other hand, though, Tom Holland's prose is remarkably vivid, more readable and exciting than many books of fiction I've read.

This is the history of the clash between Greece and Persia (remember the movie "The 300"?). What makes

this book really great is the fact that Holland provides a panoramic view of almost 3 centuries of rather obscure ancient history. He tells the story from both sides. Almost half the book is devoted to the rise of the Persian Empire and believe you me, it makes for an incredibly fascinating read. Who knew the court at Persepolis was as full of intrigue and behind-the-scenes struggles and betrayals as the proverbial court at Constantinople over 8 centuries later would be reputed to be? The details about the religion of the Persian kings and the administration of the Empire are presented effortlessly. I will never forget now who the Medes were... of where Lydia was.

On to the part of the book dealing with Athens and Sparta. I already knew most of the details, but Holland makes this the best part of the book. Of special interest is the story of how Athens first experimented with a democratic system of government. And then, of course, there are the chapters devoted to the actual battles -- Marathon, Thermopilae, Salamis and Platea -- told as vividly as if the author was there on the battlefield.

This is a truly amazing read and highly recommended. Yes, I can see why the Greeks regarded history as one of the arts and gave its own Muse.

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### **Elentarri says**

I recently read *The Classical World* by Robin Lane Fox, which makes only a passing mention of the Battle at Thermopylae, Battle of Salamis and the invasion of Greece by Xerxes, King of Persia. So I decided to fill in the gap with **Persian Fire by Tom Holland**.

The author provides a well written narrative of the rise of the Persian Empire, the political experimenting/squabbling of the Greek city-states (such as Sparta and Athens) and the eventual clash of Persia and Greece. Holland has the ability to make long-dead people (e.g. Darius, Xerxes, and Leonidas), as well as ancient battles, come alive on the page.

Enough battle details and maps are provided to explain what is going on without bogging the text down with minute details. The author also provided a timeline at the back of the book, so you know when everything is happening.

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### **D?nnis says**

The title is somewhat misleading. Persian Empire serves more of a backdrop to a narrative about the heroic struggle and legendary civilization of Ancient Greece. The story is wonderful in its own right, but this is not what I counted on. There're many good books on the Greek-Persian war. I expected a more thorough investigation of this world's first superpower, to which that conflict amounted to something more than a border skirmish. Too bad yet again we only scratched surface and seen just a tip of an iceberg. I know there are scholarly tomes, but I wanted something more easy-going...alas, not this time.

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### **Jonfaith says**

I Bought Persian Fire in Heathrow returning from Morocco. We had spent the night before with my wife's brother in Reading. Having returned from the dually (you know what I mean) arid Marrakesch, we were

greeted with a bounty of Czech pilsners. The following morning I was half-pained and entirely groggy. I bought this upon entering the airport. It was only then that we discovered that our flight had changed gates and we literally dashed for 45 minutes until we arrived for our flight, dripping with exertion. I started to read as we underwent the 33 trials of boarding a plane bound for the United States.

Holland establishes these ancient matters with contemporary models without losing focus on the epoch and not falling prey to any jingoistic east/west dynamics. In fact the heroes of this portrait, if we are to accept such, should be the Taliban of our own day and age. The Spartans were tough, as were the Persians. Thomas Hobbes understood the stakes. So does Tom Holland.

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### **Jean says**

This is a dramatizing of the Greco-Persian Wars, not the history of the Persian Empire. The Persian Empire was founded by Cyrus the Great in the sixth century B. C. and was a massive Empire even by todays viewpoint. He ruled the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and well beyond the Danube River in Europe. Holland provides a brief history of the Persian Empire and also of Sparta and Athens. This brief history allows someone unfamiliar with this timeframe to understand the events under discussion. The immediate cause of the War was a revolt in the Greek Cities on the Ionian coast in 499 B.C. The Greeks were rejecting Persian rule. The revolt was put down, but in 493 B.C. the Persians launched a punitive expedition which was defeated at Marathon in 490 B.C. Ten years later the Persians again launched an invasion this time by both land and sea. The Greeks deployed at Thermopylae and Artemisium in 480 B.C. The Athenians were led by Themistocles and the Spartans by Leonidas. The Persians were commanded by Darius. In 479 B.C., the battles for Plataea and Mykale were fought and the Persians were led by Xerxes.

Holland tells these famous ancient battles in a dramatic fashion. He attempts to bring history to life and make a more interesting read. Holland provides a mostly pro-Greek account of these battles. It would have been great if he had presented a neutral viewpoint and provided detailed information about both sides of the War. I am very familiar with the Greek viewpoint of these battles and would have liked to learn the Persian viewpoint. Otherwise, it was a fun way to learn a chronicle of the Greco-Persian War.

I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. The book is about 15 hours long. Michael Page does a good job narrating the book. Page is a multi-award winning narrator and has been narrating audiobooks since 1984.

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### **Kristy K says**

*Persian Fire* looks at much more than just the rise of the Persian empire. It focuses heavily on the Greeks as well and while Holland explains his reasoning for this and it made sense, I do wish more time could have been spent examining the Persians. This feels more like a historical look at the Persian Wars through the eyes of the Greeks and I was hoping for a more detailed account of the Persians. However it was still well-written and informative.

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## Mike says

Very readable and entertaining, this book tackles a topic that has been covered by many historians and attempts to give a balanced view of the events leading up to and following the war between Greece and Persia, as well as of course covering the war itself in detail. The striking thing about this one is that the Persians are given equal time and a fair treatment. It is all too tempting to dwell on the heroism of the Greeks defending their liberty in a series of dramatic episodes out of Herodotus. Instead both sides are shown, warts and all, and the considerable achievements of the Persians are given their due. A great antidote to books & films like Frank Miller's *300* (which was a lot of fun but totally detached from history).

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## WarpDrive says

I am going to give this book a rating that is the result of an average between two different ingredients:

- the fluent and compelling writing style, the exciting, vibrant and riveting historical narrative, the moments of epic poetry reminiscent of the best Homeric tradition, the startling immediacy with which the most stirring episodes of the confrontation between the Persian behemoth and the Greek city-states are brought to life by the author, they all unequivocally deserve, in my opinion, a 4-star rating, even a 5-star rating. The author is definitely a superb story-teller, managing to combine a reasonably high level of historical accuracy with a sparkling, entertaining, vivid narrative. A highly pleasurable reading, which I found very enjoyable; a real page-turner. The author is also very good at properly contextualizing the conflict between Greece and Persian, nicely describing the historical background.

- on the other hand, I must ruffle some feathers (*considering the overall very high rating of this book: 4.16 at time of writing of this review*) and say that the overall author's performance in this book is much better as a narrator and chronicler than as a proper historian. The lack of sufficient historical detail and analysis, the frequently uncritical trust in Herodotus as the almost exclusive source, the presence of some outdated and cringe-worthy generalizations, the overall lack of balance (sadly shared with much historiography, Western-inspired but also non-Western-sourced), resulting in the book not giving full justice to the remarkable, fascinating and brilliant Persian civilization of the Achaemenids, but, on the contrary, unfortunately providing a partially one-sided (pro-Greek) view of this momentous series of events, do not deserve, in my opinion, a rating higher than a 2 or 2.5-star.

As a result of the quite contrasting levels of personal satisfaction with regards to the two different aspects of the book listed above, I therefore decided to give it a 3-star rating.

I am now going to elaborate further why I was not really satisfied with the overall historical approach manifested by the author in this book:

- The first and foremost reason of my dissatisfaction lies in the author partial perpetuation of a tired, 19-th century narrative that contrasts freedom-loving, independent Greek city-states, harbingers of democratic ideals, with a despotic, over-stretched, corrupt and decadent Persian empire. A narrative that tends to artificially emphasize the harsh collision, and deep contrast, between Persia and the Classical Greek culture; furthermore, it is a narrative that tends (equally artificially) to stress a more or less direct link between such Greek civilization and the peculiarities and achievements of modern Western civilization (such as science, democracy etc.).

As the author states: *"There was much more at stake during the course of the Persian attempts to subdue the Greek mainland than the independence of Greece ... Much that made Greek civilization distinctive would*

*have been aborted." "The legacy passed onto modern Europe would have been immeasurably impoverished".* The author also explains that the achievements of Greek civilization, such as the philosophy of Plato, would not have existed if the Persians had not been expelled, and therefore Western Civilization would not have developed in the way it did.

Well, I strongly object to this approach. I am going, in the next sections of my review, to seriously question this whole narrative, which is simply (in my opinion) misguided and profoundly incorrect, and a narrative that has been challenged by many recent historians.

To be fair to the author, it must also be said that he does appreciate some aspects of the sophistication and culture of the Persian Empire; he also does try, to a larger extent than many other authors, to steer a more reasoned, middle course: we are not dealing here with the coarseness and crass over-simplification and one-sidedness so evident in popularizations such as the movie "300". In comparative terms, the Persians are in this book given a fairer treatment than in many other similar popular history books, and this is commendable. The author also does get into some of the dark aspects of the Classical Greek Civilization; he does not portray it in exclusively positive terms.

- Another element of personal profound dissatisfaction with this book is when, in the introduction, the author compares the Persian Wars with the current conflict between Islamic fundamentalism and the West. The author asks the question "why do they hate us?" and describes it as a reason for embarking on the study of this particular period of Ancient history.

In my personal opinion nothing could be more dangerous, unhistorical, preposterous and simply wrong. Maybe the author, rather than trying to artificially connect events in ancient history to current geopolitical issues, should have tried to answer this question by looking at the much nearer past - like the illegal invasion of IRAQ conducted by the US without the approval of the UN, just as an example.

Moreover, the very definition of the "The East" and "the West" are definitions that no serious historian should ever use (unless heavily qualified and contextualized). The underlying implicit assumption that the "East" and the "West" have maintained consistent and opposing identities over the past two thousand and five hundred years is just ridiculous. And, if we really want to play the author's game and talk about current Iran as a direct descendant of the Achaemenids, well I always wondered why this country has always attracted such unflinching hostility from parts of the West, while it is clear that the "friend" Saudi Arabia (home of the extreme Sunni Wahhabism, by the way) has been covertly financing international terrorism for quite some time, and that 15 out of the 19 Al-Qaeda 9/11 terrorists were of Saudi nationality. But this is a different story, I guess.

- Another element that I found quite irritating is when the author disingenuously conflates his overall historical narrative with some of the most partisan and prejudiced of the Greek views; for example, after almost grudgingly admitting that the upper classes in many Greek cities were actually pro-Persia, he uses terms such as "suckers of Oriental chic" to define them. Similarly, he defines the local Lydian/Ionian rulers as "quislings", which is a negative judgment-laden word that a serious historian should not unnecessarily use. Similarly, the factions of cities such as Thebes that were Pro-Persia were defined as "traitorous". Who used these terms ? Herodotus? The author himself? The Greeks opposed to Persian influence ? Is this the historians consensus ? Or is it the author's poetic license ?

Let me now expand a couple of points where I most strongly object to this overall narrative - a narrative that some sources are still perpetuating, including (*not fully, but to some extent; see my qualifiers above*) the author of this book:

#### **CLAIM: THE ACHAEMENID AS A DESPOTIC, "BARBARIAN" EMPIRE, THAT WOULD HAVE SUPPRESSED/LIMITED THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF CLASSICAL GREEK CIVILIZATION:**

- the Persian Empire was a remarkably tolerant (for the times), multinational, multi-ethnic empire that never tried to suppress local cultures, unless they were a threat to the stability of the state. In 493, just a few years

before Salamis and Plataea, Xerxes' general Mardonius had accepted democracy as system of government of the Greek cities in the Persian empire. The Persian Empire became the first to attempt to govern many different ethnic groups on the principle of equal responsibilities and rights for all people. For the Spartan conquered peoples ("helots"), Persian rule, by comparison, would have felt like the sweetest freedom.

- the Ionian Greek cities did not suffer economically or culturally from the Persian domination; actually, nearly the whole first generation of Greek philosophers were born in areas and cities dominated by Persia (Pythagoras, for example; also, Heraclites was a court philosopher of the Achaemenid empire)

- not many know that the Cyrus Cylinder was described as the world's first charter of human rights, and it was translated into all six official U.N. languages. A replica of the cylinder is kept at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. The text of the cylinder expresses Cyrus' respect for religious and cultural tolerance; and as result of his farsighted policies, Cyrus gained the overwhelming support of his subjects and cemented his empire into a coherent polity.

- The artificial opposition between the East and the West makes even less sense when related to Ancient Greece: it simply ignores the many, deep influences of the Eastern Civilizations on the development of the Greece civilization itself. Moreover, Ancient Greece was culturally and geographically closer to Ancient Persia than to "Western" Europe

- In general, it is at least a unwarranted generalization, if not a clear untruth, that economic and even intellectual development can only flourish under indigenous, democratic governments. It is disingenuous to conflate in this manner politics with intellectual development, culture and arts – the relationship exists, but it is far from linear and deterministic.

- I am afraid the author is really very restrictive in defining the Greek Civilization as the one only of the "Classical" period. It is not just about the period of Phidias. For example, the most famous of Greek mathematicians, Euclid, lived and flourished in Alexandria in Egypt around 300 BC, during the reign of Ptolemy I (hardly a democratic government, by the way). Another famous example is Archimedes. And Apollonius, who was 25 years younger than Archimedes. The last two, together with Euclid, define the period that is commonly "golden age" of Greek mathematics. It was actually only when Greek mathematics merged with Egyptian and Persian/Babylonian mathematics that we have what is now commonly perceived as the legacy that ancient "Greek" mathematics left to subsequent civilizations.

-The Persian Empire represented a sophisticated civilization that, just as an example, provided:

1. A rational and efficient tax-collection system

2. Local self-government, with overall management provided by the system of satrapies

3. A complex system of roads still used today; the empire had an efficient and far-reaching network of roads and waystations, also supporting a complex postal system;

4. A uniform monetary system (based on a silver and gold coinage system), with standardized weights and measures

5. In the early part of the first millennium B.C., before Rome was even founded, in Persia a system of underground aqueducts called qanats were constructed

6. Darius funded the rebuild of the Jewish temple (the process started with Cyrus), supported Greek cults and the Elamite priesthood. He had also observed Egyptian religious rites and had built the temple for the God Amun.

7. Sound and farsighted administrative planning

8. Trade was extensive, and under the Achaemenids there was an efficient infrastructure that facilitated the exchange of commodities among the far reaches of the empire. Persian words for typical items of trade became prevalent in the East, and some of them even entered the English and other European languages

9. A sophisticated and universal legal system

10. The Achaemenids absorbed the many art forms and the cultural and religious traditions of several of the conquered peoples, and synthesized them into unique, beautiful forms and styles.

11. For example, the palace at Persepolis presents a feast of architectural brilliance, grandeur and magnificence, highlighted by beautiful reliefs presenting a cogent narrative. By the way, presence of Greek workmanship in the palace of Persepolis is evident, proving that the Empire was open to cultural influences from all subject peoples, and it did not hesitate to utilize, support and even patronize such heritages

12. And how hostile were the Persians towards rationalism? Well, as an example the research program of the Chaldaeans in Persian Babylonia followed what can be seen as a precursor of the scientific method.

13. Soon after the end of the hostilities with the Persian Empire, Sparta and especially Athens almost self-destroyed with the Peloponnesian War (431-404BC); let me venture here into highly speculative territory, but I might even be tempted to state that, had things gone differently, the peace brought by the resulting Persian domination might have created a more peaceful environment, more conducive to the higher intellectual pursuits that so distinguished the Ancient Greeks

#### CLAIM: THERE IS A DIRECT LINK BETWEEN THE DEMOCRACY IN GREECE AND THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAS AND OTHER DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF MODERN WESTERN CIVILIZATION

- Athens was the world's first "democracy", but it did not implement universal freedom, let alone universal suffrage, and it later dominated many surrounding city-states in a openly dictatorial fashion (Delian League). The Athenian attitude towards women was the most restrictive of any polity in Greece, forcing "respectable" women into a secluded existence similar to that imposed in modern times, for example, by the Taliban. We should not forget that the ideal polity of Plato was not a democratic government, but a peculiar, militaristic, hierarchical state clearly based on the Spartan model. We should also remember that the democratic government of Athens was an outlier in the history of Greece itself, not a common occurrence.

- The west did not reject absolutism out of hand when they defeated Xerxes, as even a cursory examination of history will reveal; Western Civilization only very recently, in overall historical terms, has commonly adopted genuine criteria of fully democratic government. Until WWI there were Empires in the very heart of Europe. Modern Europe started developing some of its peculiar features during periods where (like in the case of the Sun King) absolutism was the norm. Again, we need to separate the political aspects from other elements (cultural, economical etc.) of a civilization - there is a link between the two, but it is not linear nor simple nor deterministic.

- The direct, almost exclusive link between Ancient Greece and Modern Western European civilization has been questioned by many historians, who have highlighted that this link is not unique and not direct, and that the influences on the birth and development of Western European culture (*and religion too: the influences of zoroastrianism on Judaism and Christianity are not negligible*) are many and complex: the heritage of Jewish, Celtic, Germanic, Slavic, and of other ethnic and linguistic groups should not be forgotten nor underestimated. For example, it can be argued that the very idea of "democratic" government can also be seen, in its embryonic form, in the ancient governing assemblies of Germanic/Nordic societies, made up of the free people of the community. Similarly, the the East Slavic "veche" (like the one in Novgorod in Russia), is thought to have originated in tribal assemblies even predating the Rus state. Probably the oldest parliament (if we exclude the Athenian example) in Europe is the Althing, the national parliament of Iceland, founded in 930 - it is very difficult to see a direct thread connecting it to Ancient Athens.

To conclude, I want to make sure that I do not provide the wrong impression of an altogether negative opinion of this book, which after all is extremely well written, very enjoyable, and quite accurate from an historical perspective. A book which I did enjoy reading.

I also want to make it clear that, in highlighting the brilliance and sophistication of the Persian civilization, I am not discounting the amazing brilliance and originality of the Classical Greek civilization, which is one of those few peculiar periods in human history where a great explosion of collective genius takes place almost by magic, and to an astonishing degree (*but again, we should not forget that Ancient Greece did not develop in a vacuum, and that it felt deep influences from the other Eastern Civilizations*). Moreover, the epic courage and determination of the Greeks, wildly outnumbered by the Persian super-power, in fighting for their freedom and independence, are simply unforgettable. Thermopylae was an episode of pure heroism rarely matched in human history.

Nor am I negating the links between such civilization and modern Western Civilization – I am just saying that these links are not direct, nor linear, and most importantly not exclusive.

On the other hand, though, I think that it is very important that history is respected and taken seriously, that dangerous generalizations and all-too-tempting cheap comparisons with current times are avoided (especially in books of popular history, where the risks of misleading the unsophisticated reader into unwarranted conclusions are quite real). This is why I could not give this book any rating higher than a 3-star, regardless of how much I enjoyed reading it.

The 3-star reading is also due to the title itself, that I found slightly misleading – I was expecting much more focus and detail on the Persian empire than what I found in this book. I was really looking forward to a more thorough investigation of what could be termed the world's first superpower (excluding China, I guess), but in this I was left more than a bit disappointed, to be honest: how can such greatness and sophistication, in a book titled "The Persian Fire", not be given fair and full recognition?

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## **Edmund Marlowe says**

### Dubious facts and modern assumptions about ancient heroes

This history of the Greco-Persian wars of the 5th-century BC is fundamentally misconceived, as becomes clear in its introduction, where the author reassures the reader of the topical relevance of his story by purportedly tracing back to it the present conflict between the U.S. and Islamic fundamentalists. Herodotus, easily the most important source of our knowledge, is alleged to have been drawn to his tale through wondering why "the people of East and West find it so hard to live in peace." This is simply not true: Herodotus said he was interested in "the cause of the hostilities between Greeks and non-Greeks." It has long been popular to claim historical legitimacy for that self-fulfilling concept, "western" culture, by tracing it back to the Greeks, but personally I think it greatly overdone. The Greeks would have considered Holland's real forbears as at least as barbaric as the Persians and I suspect in most respects they would feel much more at home in the traditional Moslem countries of the Mediterranean, with their similarities of family structure, food, dress, beliefs about gender, fate, sex, hospitality etc. than in the US. This matters because Holland's story is skewed throughout by his fundamental assumption.

Being based mostly on Herodotus, *Persian Fire* is unsurprisingly readable with lively character sketches and anecdotes and the most interesting facts well marshaled. Holland's frequently colloquial language will also appeal to many, though personally I found it gave the narrative a gratingly modern and anachronistic flavour.

This is popular history and I would accept it on its own terms if only it did not misinform so often. Hundreds of examples could be listed, but to do so would be to bore most while wrongly suggesting to the seriously interested that this is a history whose conclusions are worth lengthy consideration. Two very different ones should suffice.

According to all the ancient sources, the Persian King Cambyses was succeeded by someone pretending to be his dead brother Bardiya, but, when the ruse was soon after discovered, the impostor was killed and his throne taken by Darius the Great. A few modern historians have speculated that perhaps the assassinated King was genuinely Bardiya and his impostorship was made up after the event to legitimise the rule of Darius, who might not have had the royal blood all the ancients believed he had. This revisionist view is that presented by Holland, though the grounds for it are extremely weak (anyone interested should read the scholarly and thorough demolition of it in the article on Darius in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*). Holland is obviously entitled to believe and present any theory he likes, but to foist it as undisputed fact on unsuspecting readers hoping for historical truth is unforgivable.

Describing the upbringing of the Spartan boy, which he unsurprisingly milks for its sensational value, he asserts that “at the age of twelve, he became legal game for cruising” and being “sodomized”, that there were “fines for boys who refused to take a lover”, and the experience of submitting “must have been” traumatic for “most young Spartans.” Each of these phrases is a fine example of how Holland turns all that is known on its head and imposes on the ancient Greeks alien Anglophone assumptions. Actually, it was the men who were fined if they did not take up a boy. “Cruising” is a good example of why Holland’s use of current colloquial English also distorts. It surely suggests seeking out sex likely to be casual, the very opposite of the relationship between the Spartan boy and his lover, which was one of deep and lasting social and legal responsibility, and involved strictly no sex according to the most authoritative witnesses (eg. Xenophon), or very limited sex according to others. No one can possibly know that Spartan boys found being sodomized “traumatic”, since none are known to have been. If they had been, it is fairer to assume they would have experienced it as their other Greek counterparts did: Aristotle discusses the problem of boys liking it too much.

I don’t believe it is necessary for history books to be nearly this misleading to be widely popular, though I admit to thinking that in any case popularity could not justify the high cost in historical truth and understanding. If you want a lively account of these wars, why not simply read Herodotus himself, whose *History* is much better written and is the authentic voice of the ancient world?

Edmund Marlowe, author of *Alexander's Choice*, a schoolboy's story, [amazon.com/dp/1481222112](https://www.amazon.com/dp/1481222112)

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## Forrest says

Tom Holland's history of the Persian Wars is thorough, enlightening and eminently readable, striking just the right balance between big-picture analysis and entralling personal anecdotes. The tricky thing about this conflict -- which pitted the small but scrappy city-states of Athens and Sparta against the almost inconceivable might of the Persian Empire under the all-powerful Darius and Xerxes -- is that there were very few battles, but to understand them requires a story spanning several generations, dozens of nations and hundreds of names. You can't understand Xerxes unless you know about Cyrus, you can't understand the actions of the Greeks unless you know about the Ionians, and you can't understand any of it without unraveling a morass of double-crosses, palace intrigues, inscrutable oracles and personal vendettas.

So, much like Herodotus, who wrote the first (and in some ways still the best) version of this story, Holland goes way back to before the beginning, tracing the rise of the Persian Empire and the complex factors that drew Asia and Europe ever closer to total war; a war that doesn't really begin until you're halfway through the book.

But Herodotus, great pioneer that he was, also let himself get sidetracked by the occasional tall tale or mythical monster. Where Holland bests him is in his clear focus and his ability to get into the heads of his subjects: rarely have I encountered a history book that so seamlessly adopted multiple points of view. Holland doesn't just tell us what the Great King did at particular juncture, but why, and from the perspective of the King's own brand of logic. He also does a pretty good job of making the story relevant to a 21st century audience through the use of modern East vs. West metaphors.

It isn't perfect. A little more detail surrounding the battles themselves would have been welcome, since -- let's be honest -- that's what most readers will come in for, to get "the real story behind 300" or whatnot. And as clear as Holland's writing is, the narrative itself can still be hard to follow simply because there's so much going on. I also found it a much slower read than I expected, chewing on it for the better part of two weeks. But those quibbles aside, *Persian Fire* is an excellent addition to the canon, and a must-read for anyone interested in a non-academic exploration of the war.

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