

Ktesias' *Persika*: A Study in Greek Historiography of the East

Ktesias has a bad reputation. If anyone knows anything about Ktesias, it is that he is an unreliable historian. This is the standard view. And as far as it goes, this assessment is difficult to take issue with. According to the *Cambridge History of Iran*, as authoritative a source as can be:

We can now check Ktesias at many points against Assyrian or Babylonian texts and the Old Persian inscriptions; and we find that— apart from the tittle-tattle about personages of the court which we have little means of checking— the specific information that he gives is usually quite false. Presumably he had not thought seriously of collecting material for an oriental history when he was at the Persian court but was tempted by his success as a raconteur on his return home to put his memorials into writing; certainly he could not have foreseen so complete an exposure of his fictions as has befallen him in the last hundred years.¹

It is fair to say that this is the consensus view of Ktesias' demerits as a historian. From a fact-checking point of view, Ktesias is a bad historian. Everything charged against him is correct: he is a purveyor of court gossip, a collector of marvels, a confabulator slipping down the slope from *historiē* to the historical romance that was to be so typical of Hellenistic history writing, and, not improbably, guilty even of the fabrication of which he was regularly accused. But bad historians are interesting precisely because they often exhibit what people in a period actually know, or want to know, better than a gifted writer such as a Herodotus or a Thucydides. They are more typical documentation.

Ktesias probably wrote his *Persika* in the first or second decade of the fourth century after leaving Persian service. Persian intervention in the affairs of Greece was increasing. The King's gold darics subsidized the Spartans, then the Athenians, finally both at the same time, playing them off against each other. In this period the Persians came near to achieving by diplomatic means the hegemony over the mainland Greeks that was lost at Salamis. The behind-the-scenes plots and intrigues of the Persian court and satraps were of keen interest to the Greeks. Ktesias may have been a scandalmonger, but he was giving his readers the inside scoop they wanted. It all made for fascinating drama that catered to some of the same conceptions and tastes as Athenian theater of the day.

¹J.M. Cook, "The Rise of the Achaemenids and Establishment of their Empire," *The Cambridge History of Iran, The*

The ancient critics invariably branded Ktesias a liar. The problem has been that, until recently, modern historians were content to follow this line, merely adding their own professional scorn of Ktesias as a kitchen tattler, as a charlatan, as a spurious historian with his sloppy methods and tales of courtesans, eunuchs, favorites, queen mothers, and royal wives. Showing what Ktesias did not do, however, is only half the job. The latest work goes beyond his deficiencies to a more complex, historicizing study of Ktesias' character as an observer and reporter, his narrative form and ideology, the nature and limitations of his sources, his influence on Greek and modern historiography of the Near East, and questions of Orientalism. Some scholars have even come to the defense of Ktesias' accuracy as a reporter, if not entirely exculpating him.

Some scholars regard Ktesias as a historical novelist or at best a writer of *petite histoire*. They compare the *Persika* to Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. Moreover, readers of Ktesias have always been struck by the prominent role given to women. From Semiramis to Parysatis his pages were full of powerful and dangerous women. Ktesias' interest in court life, scandal, intrigue, women, and amorous sentiments has been disparaged as harem gossip, and yet credited as a typical picture of the corruption of the Persian monarchy.

Modern historians have displayed a curious doublethink about Ktesias: regarding him as practicing a specious form of history, while accepting his Orientalism as an essentially accurate picture of the way the Persian Empire was organized and ruled. Consequently, modern condemnations of Ktesias effectually echo and perpetuate the biases of the Greek sources. A fresh start requires us not only to point out his shortcomings, but also to critically reassess the interpretive paradigm shaping and deforming both ancient and modern descriptions of the Near East. The most interesting scholarship has tried to back out of this cul-de-sac and reorient our understanding of the way the Persian Empire was structured and operated away from dated ideas of despotic decay.

This paper is a hermeneutic reappraisal of Ktesias, and of Greek and modern historiography about the East. Along the way I will review the ancient critics, Ktesias' biography, reputation and influence on subsequent Near Eastern history, the credibility of his reportage in the *Persika* and *Indika*, and his

reliability as a historical source. As in the new scholarship on Ktesias, my aim is to move from patronizing dismissal to a deeper historical understanding.

Ktesias of Knidos

There are few hard facts about Ktesias. Diodorus tells us that he came from the Dorian city of Knidos.² The Knidians yielded to the Persians after 546 BC. They joined the Delian League after the Persian Wars, but defected in 413 and supported the Spartans. Knidos was famous for its medical school, its wine, and the Aphrodite of Praxiteles.³ But Diodorus' other statements— Ktesias lived at the time of Cyrus's campaign, was taken prisoner, presumably at Cunaxa, and retained in the king's service for seventeen years as his physician— are full of difficulties.

The first is chronology. The *Persika* says that he left Artaxerxes' service in 398/397.⁴ Since Artaxerxes' reign began in 404 BC the seventeen years has been neatly emended to seven years.⁵ Truesdall Brown considers the possibility that Ktesias was captured at Aegospotomi in 405 or passed into Artaxerxes' hands as a gift from Cyrus around this time. An early association with Cyrus would also explain why Parysatis bestowed her favor on Ktesias, thus perhaps making him privy to her iniquities.⁶

Jacoby, in line with his opinion of Ktesias as a shady and mendacious character, thought that he was exaggerating the length of his service, but usefully observed that Diodorus may have confused his facts together.⁷ There may be no connection between Ktesias' capture in battle, Cunaxa, and beginning of the seventeen years. Brown, with a more charitable view of Ktesias' truthfulness, accepts the seventeen figure and considers the possibility that he was captured in 415 and served Darius II. This was the period when Knidos went over to the Spartan side in the Peloponnesian War and the Persians were pursuing a pro-Spartan foreign policy. Brown suggests the strong possibility that Ktesias was a volunteer under the satrap of Sardis, Pissuthnes and his fate was involved in his failed revolt. Being a trained doctor from the famous

² Diodorus 2.32.4.

³ See "Knidos," in *Paulys Real Encyclopaedie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. Wilhelm Kroll (Stuttgart, 1921) vol. 11, pt. 1, 914-919 and "Cnidos," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 1996).

⁴ Ktesias, *Persika* 63-64.

⁵ Truesdall Brown, "Suggestions for a Vita of Ctesias of Cnidos," *Historia* 27 (Wiesbaden, 1978) 1

medical school of Knidus saved his neck.⁸ The Persian kings seemed to have favored Greek physicians—Democedes served Darius I and Apollonides was Ktesias' ill-fated predecessor in the court of Artaxerxes II.

Therefore, most probably Ktesias was already physician to the king at Cunaxa in 400 BC where he treated the wound he said was inflicted on him by his brother Cyrus.⁹ The royal favor thereby won led to Ktesias' later employment on various diplomatic missions. He took an active part, as self-described, in the negotiations between Evagoras of Cyprus, Pharnabazus, satrap of the Hellespontine provinces, Conon, the Athenian admiral and ally of Pharnabazus and Evagoras, and the king in 399/398. Upon the completion of a mission to Sparta, Ktesias returned home to Knidus and made a name for himself as a writer of popular history and medicine.¹⁰

Critical Assessments Ancient and Modern

The *Persika* was a history of the even-then-to-the Greeks ancient Orient in 23 books. Photius tells us that the first three books were a recount of the Assyrian Empire beginning with the legendary founders Ninus and Semiramis.¹¹ The next three covered the Median Empire to the fall of Astyages. Seven through thirteen related the deeds of Cyrus, Cambyses, the Magian usurper, Darius, and Xerxes. The last ten carried the reader through the reigns of Artaxerxes I and Darius II, to the eighth year of Artaxerxes II (398 BC).¹²

Despite the carping of critics as to its veracity, the *Persika* enjoyed immediate and lasting popularity to the end of classical antiquity. Much read, referred to, cited, and mined for information by other writers, it became the main source for early eastern history.¹³ It was perhaps the single most influential piece of bad history writing in antiquity. It made Ktesias' fame with its romance of legendary Assyrians and Medes and its exposé of the Persian court. His history of the Persian kings was widely read, although Herodotus remained the unsurpassed account of the Great Wars; and he was the standard authority for the reigns of

⁸ Brown 7-9.

⁹ Plutarch, *Artax.* 11.

¹⁰ Brown 12-19.

¹¹ Plutarch, *Persika*.

Artaxerxes I and Darius II and the early years of Artaxerxes II. Because of its great popularity and influence we perhaps better know Ktesias' *Persika* than any other lost work of antiquity.¹⁴

In fact, we have relatively copious and substantial fragments of Ktesias for a lost work. The greater part of the library of ancient literature has been completely lost. Just to consider the Greek writers on Eastern history exhaustively listed in Jacoby's *Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*, they are little more than names: Dinon, Diogenes, Diokles, Diogenes, Dionysios of Miletus, Charon of Lampsakos, Baton of Sinope, Hellanikos of Lesbos, Herakleides of Kyme, and Kriton of Pierote all published *Persika*, but we know next to nothing of them apart from Dinon and Hellanikos.¹⁵ Ktesias is one of the few non-canonical authors whose popularity insured some preservation by incorporation of large extracts from him in the compositions of other writers.

We are indebted to three sources primarily for this preservation: the summaries of the first six books digested in the second book of Diodorus' universal history (first century. BC); numerous fragments in various authors, chief among which are: Nicolaus' of Damascus abridgement of the Median history, Plutarch's references in his *Life of Artaxerxes*; and the epitome of the last seventeen books made by the Byzantine Bishop Photius in his *Bibliotheca* (ninth century BC). The good Patriarch seems to have been an avid collector of marvels like Ktesias himself, for he excerpted nearly all of the *Indika* as well.

Since there are only epitomes and digests of his work, it is difficult to form an opinion of its style. But it won the admiration of several ancient readers. Demetrius of Phaleron says that critics of Ktesias' frivolous prating have missed his clarity and vividness.¹⁶ For him Ktesias is a very "demiurge of vividness," a master of dramatic effect, and more properly considered a poet. Dionysius of Halicarnassus compares Ktesias in point of style to Thucydides, judging that Thucydides' history is composed beautifully, but not pleasantly, while Ktesias is pleasant, but not beautiful.¹⁷ I take this to mean that Ktesias was a good read, but lacking in the critical intellectual faculties that made Thucydides a great historian.

¹³ See Jacoby, "Ktesias" cols. 2066-73 for a survey.

¹⁴ Robert Drews, *The Greek Accounts of Eastern History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) 104.

¹⁵ *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*. Ed. Felix Jacobi. Number 688 (Leiden, 1958) 410-553 passim— hereafter

Photius describes Ktesias' style as very simple, clear, and pleasant. Ktesias uses the Ionic dialect, not continuously as does Herodotus, but in certain phrases and turns of speech. His narrative flows on without Herodotean digressions. Photius compares him favorably to Herodotus, the model of Ionic style, with his sense of pathos and the many surprises and delights he offers his readers.¹⁸ Ktesias clearly provide a certain *plaisir de text*.

Of course, most striking in the ancient testimonia is the barrage of attacks on Ktesias' truthfulness.¹⁹ Strabo hyperbolizes that the heroic tales of Hesiod, Homer, and the tragic poets are more believable than Herodotus, Hellanicus, and Ktesias. Ktesias came at the end of the Ionian tradition of *historiē* and is usually seen as its decadence. Strabo's grouping of the three reminds us that even Herodotus was frequently reproved as a liar by classical authors. It is not clear, however, that this extenuates the charge of mendacity against Ktesias. Plutarch cites Ktesias as source for his *Artaxerxes* with a decided note of exasperation, declaring that he has put into his work " a perfect farrago of extravagant and incredible tales."²⁰ The wonders of the *Indika* were particularly discreditable, leading Aristotle to mark Ktesias down as "untrustworthy," but still use him as his main authority on India.²¹

There are several considerations mitigating the accusation of mendacity. This was a frequent tactic in the controversies and rivalries between Greek authors. The most scurrilous belittlement of opponents as liars and plagiarists was common.²² Once made, the charge stuck. Plutarch, Strabo, and others denounced even Herodotus, the Father of History, as a liar. Ktesias did the same. Herodotus was the great predecessor that both Thucydides and Ktesias had to challenge. But while Thucydides in principle repudiated the unquestioning acceptance of legend, Photius tells us that Ktesias harshly attacked Herodotus as a teller of tales.²³ Ktesias clearly saw himself in direct competition with Herodotus, and was at pains to contradict and correct him at every point with his own version of events.

¹⁷ *FgrHist*, T12.

¹⁸ Photius, *Bibl.* 64.

¹⁹ *FgrHist*, T11a-h.

²⁰ Plutarch, *Artax.* 1, 7.6, 13.4.

²¹ *FgrHist*, T 11f; Klaus Karttunen, "The Indica of Ctesias and its Criticism," in *Graeco-Indica: India's Cultural Contacts with the Greek World*. Ed. U.P. Arora (New Delhi, 1991) 74.

Ktesias claimed to have seen with his own eyes most of the facts he reports or to have heard them from the Persians themselves.²⁴ Scholars, needless to say, have been highly skeptical of this claim. When they do not regard him as an outright fabricator, they are fond of repeating condescending remarks that as a physician Ktesias seems to have been singularly devoid of the critical perceptions of that profession and to have spent his years at the Persian court rather poorly, judging from the results. A more sympathetic view is that Ktesias did not simply made things up out of whole cloth, but was reporting oral and dynastic traditions and notions current in the East, and, as such, deserves some credence.²⁵ Significantly, specialists on the Near East have a more favorable opinion of the information in the *Persika*: Ktesias was neither a fabricator nor a critical historian, but a good reporter.²⁶ For much of his account of the fifth century Persian informants are not unlikely, although most of Ktesias seems derived from Greek informants, such as the many fellow expatriate Greeks at the Persian court.²⁷ Even if Ktesias was an entertaining concocter, the historian's task remains the same. Invention was the stock-in-trade of ancient historians. They invented and filled up gaps in their information with likely material. It was not a foible unique to Ktesias. Compare Herodotus tales and Thucydides' speeches. There are serious questions about Herodotus' Egyptian *logos* on this score.²⁸

The German scholar Felix Jacoby, one of the most thorough and searching students of Ktesias, had a low opinion of the *Persika*: Ktesias based his narrative on his predecessor, but willfully twisted it out of shape to establish his own superiority.²⁹ Robert Drews, who treated Ktesias as a study in pathology and seaminess, reached the ne plus ultra of contempt.³⁰ More sympathetic students of Ktesias have been Olmstead, who made use of Ktesias in his classic *History of the Persian Empire*, mildly chiding him for giving

²⁴ Photius, *Bibl.* 1.

²⁵ An older work defending traditional sources for Ktesias' account of the Persian kings was A. Christensen, *Les Gestes des Rois dans les Traditions de l'Iran Antique* (Paris, 1936). I.V. P'yankov suggests that K used Median oral traditions for Median history in "Istoriya Persii, Ktesiya I Sredneaziatskie satrapy Akhemenidov v kontse" V v. do n.e." *VDI* 92, 2:35-50.

²⁶ For more favorable opinions see A.T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); *Die Persika des Ktesias von Knidos*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm König (Graz, 1972) and R. Schmitt, "Die Wiedergabe Iranischer Namen bei Ktesias von Knidos im Vergleich zur Sonstigen Griechischen Überlieferung," *Prolegomena to the Sources on the History of the Pre-Islamic Central Asia*, ed. J. Harmatta (Budapest, 1979) 119-133.

²⁷ Bigwood discusses Ktesias possible sources in 1976, 2-14.

²⁸ For discussion of Herodotus' own inventiveness see, for example, W.A. Heidel, *Hecataeus and the Egyptian Priests in Herodotus* (New York, 1987) and D. Fehling, *Herodotus and his Sources: Citation, Invention, and Narrative Art*, trans. J.G.

“us much information which we should otherwise seriously miss, though we must regret that he did not make better use of his opportunities,” and Truesdell Brown, who advises that we make the best of him.³¹ He agrees with Jacoby that Ktesias is unreliable in synchronizing his Persian and Greek accounts, his Persian Wars are factually careless and inaccurate, and the *Persika* is something in between a historical work and a novel—yet not a historical novel.

The *Persika*

Historians enjoy pointing out Ktesias’ gross blunders. He located the city of Nineveh on the Euphrates instead of the Tigris.³² The legendary queen Semiramis build the city of Babylon.³³ Darius’ Behistun inscription was a memorial put up by Semiramis, who climbed the cliff on a mound of pack-saddles.³⁴ Cambyses defeated an Amyrtaeus in Egypt, not Psammetichus III.³⁵ And he puts the battle of Plataea before Salamis.³⁶ To the severer critics these egregious errors make a mockery of Ktesias’ claims to have been an *autoptès* or *autèkoos* of whatever he reported.³⁷ Almost no one now takes seriously his claim that he researched his facts about the Median kings in the royal archives (*basilikai diphtheria*), or even believes that such Persian archives existed.³⁸ Furthermore, Ktesias’ Assyrian tales of Ninus and Semiramis and much of his Median history are usually regarded as pure confections, larded with imaginative elaborations, and not history, strictly speaking, at all.³⁹

Romance of the East

In the abridgements of Diodorus and Nicolaus romance bulks large, especially in the fabulous material of the Assyrian and Median books. We may safely conclude that it did so in the original.⁴⁰ More than two

³⁰ Drews 103f.

³¹ Olmstead 380; Brown 78, 86.

³² Diodorus II 3.2.

³³ Diodorus II 6.7f.

³⁴ Diodorus II 13.2.

³⁵ Photius, *Bibl.* 9.

³⁶ Photius, *Bibl.* 25-26.

³⁷ Photius, *Bibl.* 1.

³⁸ Diodorus II 32.4. Drews makes short work of those who have in 198n65.

books were devoted to the novella of Ninus and Semiramis, legendary founders of Assyria and Babylon. 1300 years of Assyrian history were then skimmed over in one book and concluded with the lurid fate of Sardanapalus, a garbled legend perhaps of Asshurbanipal, who lost the Assyrian empire to the Medes.⁴¹ It is generally assumed that in these earlier, legendary books Ktesias was tapping oral traditions that he heard in Persia and Babylonia.⁴² Those of the opinion that he was a retailer of court hearsay question it.

All of Books Four and Five were filled, inferring from the fact that these are the only extracts from the Median books by Diodorus and Nicolaus, with the tales of Parsondes and of the brave Median general Stryangaeus and Zarina, the beautiful queen of the Sacae. These two episodes have the appearance of Iranian folktales and loosely resemble those found in the epic *Shahnameh* of Firdousi (tenth cen. AD), which is believed to incorporate pre-Sassanid material.⁴³ More pertinently, they have the flavor of ancient romances, as does Ktesias' highly melodramatic account of the exploits of Cyrus the Great, comprising Books Seven through Eleven.

The novelized histories of both Ktesias and Xenophon, indeed, are regarded as antecedents of the ancient novel.⁴⁴ Some scholars regard Ktesias as the first novelist or writer of such entertaining historical fiction. This is clearly true for his *Assyriaka*. The *Alexander Romance* was the most successful of these novelized biographies. The loves and adventures of some non-Greek hero in an exotic Near Eastern setting were typical of these ancient romances. Ktesias' tale of the mythical founder of Nineveh was a prototype of these historically colored fictions, and was turned into the *Ninus Romance*, fragments of which are dated to ca. 100 BC. It tells how Ninus the young king of Assyria won the hand of the daughter of Derceia, the unnamed Semiramis, fought the Armenians, and was parted from his consort by shipwreck.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Diodorus II 24-28.

⁴² J. R. Gardiner-Garden, for one, thinks that Ktesias was drawing on Syro-Babylonian and Persian cycles of tales and does not categorically reject the existence of the Median king lists. *Ktesias on Early Central Asian History and Ethnography* (Bloomington, 1987) 2-9. For Momigliano, Ktesias transformed simple legends into "romanzo d'avventure" with a "lussureggiante abbondanza dei particolari" (quoted in Drews 197n56). "Tradizione e invenzione in Ctesia," *Atene e Roma* 12 (1931) 25.

⁴³ See Drews 110-111 and Gardiner-Garden 2-3. No one now believes that Ktesias' Median tales, for all their epic appearance, were antecedents of Firdousi or were based on Persian archives. But see *The Fragments of the Persika of Ktesias*, ed. John Gilmore (London, 1888) 95-96. It does not seem improbable to me that he was dipping into the stream of tales that would flow on into Persian epic.

⁴⁴ The Xenophon's education of an idealized hero became the preferred model for later Hellenistic romances. The story of Panthea and Abradatas in the *Cyropaedia* was a favorite in Hellenistic times and inspired imitation. B.E. Perry,

Ktesias, Herodotus, and the Persian Wars

Ktesias' narrative of the Persian wars is remarkable for its odd chronology, startling omissions, and variance from Herodotus at almost every point. As Photius says, "on practically every matter Ktesias presents a history opposed to that of Herodotus."⁴⁶ It is as though Ktesias was deliberately contradicting his predecessor. Proving Herodotus wrong appears to have been a greater passion than the truth. Interest in the great events of the wars with the Persians was the impetus behind the *Persika* of Hellanicus and the *Histories* of Herodotus. Ktesias sped over the Great Wars (it was not the centerpiece or culmination of his history), perhaps, precisely because it had already been done and was exhausted as a subject and source for new *erga* and *megala praxeis*.⁴⁷ Looking for sensational new material, Ktesias found it in his Assyrian tales, which he picked up while in the King's service, and in the reigns of Xerxes and his successors told as a series of escapades and plots of royal favorites, courtesans, and eunuchs in Books XIV-XXIII.

Burn describes how nineteenth-century scholars hoped to use Ktesias as a control on Herodotus.⁴⁸ The decipherment of Old Persian inscriptions and other advances in Iranology has tended to demonstrate the soundness of Herodotus and the unsoundness of Ktesias. For events nearer his own time he may have his uses, but for the Persian wars he is worse than useless, for he may have contaminated the tradition with nonsense.

By way of extenuation, Ktesias was writing several generations after the fact and did not have the eyewitness sources Herodotus had at his disposal. Later accounts of the Persian wars are unreliable in comparison to Herodotus for this simple reason. It has also been suggested that Photius' dry extract may be misleading in its emphases and omissions. As we can see in his epitome of the *Indika*, Photius had a taste for marvels and oddities.⁴⁹ It may have been Ktesias' odd differences from Herodotus that chiefly drew his attention. For instance, Ktesias devoted five or six books (VI-XI) to the exploits of Cyrus the

⁴⁶ Photius, *Bibl.* 1, 64.

⁴⁷ This is Drews' opinion, 106-108.

⁴⁸ A.R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks* (London, 1962) 11.

⁴⁹ For discussion of the reliability of Photius' epitome see Joan Bigwood, "Ktesias As Historian of the Persian Wars."

Great, covering his eastern campaigns more thoroughly than Herodotus did.⁵⁰ Little of this is preserved by Photius, whose epitome concentrates on the reigns of Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes— subjects Ktesias brushed over in two books. It may not fully reflect Ktesias' account. The omissions may be Photius'. On the other hand some historians have threshed and harrowed Ktesias' account for kernels of fact and have found it not entirely worthless. Could Ktesias be preserving alternative reports?

Some, for instance, have found his figure for the Persian forces of 80 myriads more credible than Herodotus' impossible 170 myriads.⁵¹ Although Ktesias was hardly averse to astronomical figures: he gave 1,700,000 to Ninus and 3,000,000 to Semiramis. But 800,000 is still far too high for Mardonius' army— a range of 50-70,000 is more realistic.⁵² And he provides exact statistics for every period, no matter how remote: this does not inspire confidence.⁵³

That being said, whatever may have been the worth of other parts of the *Persika*, Ktesias' account of the Persian wars remains an indefensible mess of muddled chronology, confusion of persons and events, awry figures, bias, and sensationalism. Why this is so is unclear. It appears to be a combination of lack of personal contact and first-hand reports, his antagonism to Herodotus, and— the favorite explanation— his carelessness of the truth. Ktesias also had, some scholars believe, a strong anti-Athenian bias, of which more in a moment. What could have been the source for some of his variant versions is hard to imagine. Embroidering seems the simplest explanation. Entertainment value seems to have been Ktesias' aim. Whatever their value as history, Ktesias' divergences are intriguing for their own sake.

Among the more startling omissions is the whole Ionian revolt, covered extensively by Herodotus in Book V. The burning of Sardis is not even mentioned among the motives for Xerxes' war of vengeance on the Greeks. Ktesias offered two other reasons. After completing his account of Darius' disastrous Scythian expedition, Ktesias described how Datis proceeded to make a sweep through the Aegean. During a raid on the Attic coast, he was killed at Marathon. The Athenians would not return Datis' corpse. Second, the Chalcedonians tried to break up Darius's bridge over the Bosphorus.⁵⁴ Herodotus tells us that

⁵⁰ *FGrH* F9.2-3; Herod. 1.177.

⁵¹ Her. 7.60; *FGrH* F13.27.

⁵² *FGrH* F1— Diod. 2.5.4 and F1— Diod. 2.17.1.

after the battle Datis returned safely to Susa with his fellow general Artaphernes and the captive Eretrians.⁵⁵ This is a fuller account of Datis than we find in Herodotus, and has the appearance of a good story. Surely, Bigwood asks, if true, would not Herodotus have known of it?⁵⁶ We cannot be absolutely certain. And Herodotus' readings of motivations and *causae belli* often have their own problems. Perhaps Ktesias bagged a good story that Herodotus missed.

Ktesias attributed the treachery at Thermopylae to other Trachinians, not Ephialtes, as does Herodotus.⁵⁷ An Artapanus, of whom Herodotus made no mention, was in command.⁵⁸ The battle of Thermopylae itself is told as a crescendo of assaults suspiciously like, Bigwood notes, Herodotus' tale of Zopyrus and the capture of Babylon. Leonidas repulsed one myriad of Persians, then two, and finally five.⁵⁹

Strikingly omitted from Ktesias' account are the sea-battles of Artemisium and Mycale. Again, it is uncertain if these are Photius' omissions or Ktesias'. Herodotus describes a major action at Artemisium with 600 vessels subsequently lost in storms off the coasts of Magnesia and Euboea.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, in agreement with Ktesias, he has the Persian Grand Fleet arrived at Phalerum with a thousand ships, undiminished by storms or naval engagements. Photius' Ktesias has no battle, storms, or losses: the Persian fleet began the campaign with 1000 and reached Salamis with 1,100.⁶¹

Referring to "all the other battles" after Plataea and Salamis Photius plucked a figure of 12 myriads in casualties out of Ktesias.⁶² It is doubtful that this is any reference to Mycale, considering Ktesias' general ignorance of events at sea. There is a later tradition of 120,000 casualties after Plataea or at Thebes, which may have been derived from Ktesias, an example, perhaps, of his contamination of the tradition. Jacoby took this to be the figure for total Persian losses for the whole war.⁶³

⁵⁵ Her. 6.119

⁵⁶ Bigwood, 1978, 24-25; 1964, 150f.

⁵⁷ Photius, *Bibl.* 24

⁵⁸ Ktesias' variant or misidentified personnel are a marked feature of his account, most notoriously in the case of the list of seven conspirators against the Magus (Photius, *Bibl.* 14). In the Persian cases, they may possibly represent conflicting claims to precedence and prestige by Persian aristocratic houses.

⁵⁹ Bigwood, 1978, 26; Her. 3.157

⁶⁰ Her. 8.66.

⁶¹ *FGrH* F13.30.

One of Ktesias' most infamous errors was putting the Battle of Plataea before Salamis. Bigwood proposed two explanations.⁶⁴ First, it may be a geographical simplification of the sequence of events. The plausibility of this is reinforced by the consideration that Ktesias was writing several generations after the fact and one or two generations after *Herodotus*. By Ktesias' day, with the demise of the eyewitnesses available to Herodotus, the chronology had, undoubtedly, become inexact.

Second, a vague grasp of temporal sequence may have conspired with partisan political sympathies. As a Dorian from the Spartan-sympathizing city of Knidus, Ktesias seems not only to have been anti-Herodotus, but anti-Athenian as well. It is difficult to gauge the significance of this. One detects a pro-Spartan prejudice at points and is tempted to see a Spartan version of the Great Wars reflected in Ktesias. Plutarch reproaches him for a partiality to the Spartans. This might explain the curious neglect of the naval side of the war, where the Athenians played the leading part, as at Artemisium and Mycale. Spartan actions at Thermopylae and Plataea, conversely, were played up. He was perhaps countering the Athenian-centered account of Herodotus in which the Spartans are ever laggard and selfish: after the glorious holding action at Thermopylae they did not retreat to the Isthmus and abandon the rest of Hellas to the barbarians, but fought them again at Plataea. The tendentiousness and inaccuracy of Ktesias' account, therefore, may reflect anti-Athenian traditions. He may be giving us something closer to the Spartan version of the Great Wars. No doubt conflicting claims to its glorious legacy intensified during the Peloponnesian Wars.

Pro-Spartan bias might be a better way to explain some of Ktesias' inadequacies as a historian rather than his personal dishonesty or animus to Herodotus. But he is not consistent in this. Like Herodotus he seems to have preferred a good story over whatever biases he might have harbored. He naturally lauded the heroism of Leonidas and the Spartans at Thermopylae, and even enhanced it by having 40,000 Persians encircle them to Herodotus' mere ten thousand Immortals.⁶⁵ He fully acknowledged the successes of Miltiades at Marathon and Themistocles at Salamis. Ktesias (or Photius) did not even mention the Athenians as participants in the battle of Plataea. He absurdly numbered the Spartans at 300 with 1,000 Perioeci and 6,000 allies facing 120,000 Persians, apparently confusing Plataea with

Thermopylae.⁶⁶ Herodotus put the manpower at 110,000 Greeks to the 300,000 Persians.⁶⁷ Was Ktesias trying to magnify or diminish the significance of the engagement? His account is so slipshod it is unclear what he intended.

Ktesias' Mardonius did not die at Plataea in Ktesias, but was afterward slain by the wrath of heaven in a storm of hailstones while attempting to sack Delphi.⁶⁸ The eunuch Matakas sacked Delphi after Xerxes' return to Sardis.⁶⁹ This is all wildly divergent from Herodotus but, despite the wrathful hailstones, more prosaic than his miraculous account of events at Delphi.⁷⁰ Photius' summary, if not Ktesias, is often more matter-of-fact than Herodotus.

At Salamis, Ktesias credited Herodotus' story of Themistocles' secret messages to Xerxes that hastened his departure from Greece.⁷¹ But he numbered the total Greek fleet at 700, only 110 of which were Athenian, to Herodotus' 380 with 180 Athenian.⁷² The commander of the Persian fleet is an Onophas, not included in Herodotus' list of four admirals.⁷³ And Ktesias corrected Herodotus' story of Xerxes' construction of a mole to Salamis as a cover for his retreat, removing it to *before* the battle. This seems more sensible.⁷⁴

Decadence

Ktesias did not invent the Greek image of the East, but was one of its most influential representatives. Like Xenophon, he romanticized Cyrus II and displayed the prevalent fourth century Greek view of the complete decadence of the Achaemenid Empire after the brilliant conquests and reign of its founder. Ktesias' Cyrus, though, runs to the picaresque rather more than Xenophon's ideal monarch.⁷⁵ Cyrus was one of the few figures in ancient history to have a universally favorable press with both the Greeks and

⁶⁵Her. 7.83 and 7.215; *FGrH* F13.27

⁶⁶Photius, *Bibl.* 25; Bigwood, 1978, 28.

⁶⁷Her. 9.28f.

⁶⁸Photius, *Bibl.* 25.

⁶⁹Photius 27.

⁷⁰Her. 37

⁷¹Photius 26.

⁷²Her. 8.82; *FGrH* F13,30.

⁷³Her. 7.97.

Jews, and with posterity, as an enlightened prince. In the Greek instance, and probably in the Jewish, judging from the treatment of Xerxes in the Book of Esther, the glorification of Cyrus was in counterpoint to the equally popular view of the utter decomposition and corruption of the Persians from the mad Cambyses on. Like the *Persika*, Xenophon's "imperial fiction," the *Cyropaedia*, is a record of ignominious acts, treacheries, revenges, injustices, vendettas, luxury, fabulous wealth, unmanly softness, and ineptitude— all the ingredients of oriental despotism.⁷⁶ The Persian court was an exotic seraglio of intrigues, plots, refined tortures, and moral degeneration.⁷⁷ The Greeks relished this picture. Ktesias and Xenophon both catered to it; and, it is essentially the image of the Persians sustained to this day in the popular imagination and scholarly treatment.

Many scholars of the Persian Empire now regard this image as seriously deficient, compounded out of the hellenocentrism of the Greeks themselves, the philhellenism of ancient historians, and the Orientalism of both.⁷⁸ More precisely, the idea that the Persian Empire was in a state of decline in its last hundred years has been fundamentally questioned. The accuracy of Ktesias' scandalous exposé of the Persian court is a separate matter. Nevertheless, the idea of decay in the Empire has persisted in newer surveys such as J. M. Cook's *The Persian Empire*.⁷⁹

After the Persian wars Greek attitudes toward foreigners became overwhelmingly negative. This was when the Greeks, particularly the Athenians, "invented the barbarian" as the natural, moral, and cultural inferior of the Hellenes. This inferiority was environmental and cultural rather than racial. From this sharply ethnocentric point of view, the Persians came to be seen as the polar opposite of every Greek excellence. An idealized Cyrus was the exception that proved the rule. In any case, Xenophon in his political romance conceived Cyrus as the embodiment of a Greek ideal of monarchy. Ethnocentric stereotypes pervaded fourth-century Greek drama, art, and political philosophy. Most significant was the contrast between Greek liberty and Persian autocracy, between free men and slaves, between democracy

⁷⁶ I refer here to James Tatum, *Xenophon's Imperial Fiction: On "the Education of Cyrus."* (Princeton, 1989).

⁷⁷ Jack Balcer, *A Prosopographical Study of the Ancient Persians Royal and Noble c. 550-450 BC* (New York, 1993) 199-200.

⁷⁸ Most notably H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kuhrt, eds. "Decadence in the Empire or Decadence in the

and the Great King, a contrast that was to be resuscitated in the modern image of the east.⁸⁰ It might be argued that Ktesias' *Persika* not merely reflected these common prejudices, but sensationally pandered to them with tales of the despotic decadence of the Persian court.

The view of the Persian Empire as a petrified despotism has itself remained immobile from the fourth century until today. It persisted because of its ideological uses for both Greek and modern European expansionism. The decadence, however, may be mostly in the eyes of the beholders, in this case, the main sources for the fourth century: Xenophon, Ktesias, and Dinon. In particular, Ktesias' obsession with *Haremsintrigue*, as Jacoby called it, may have more to do with Greek prejudices than the actualities even of court life.

Frozen despotism and the fatal scheming of courtesans and eunuchs are the stock props of Orientalism. Edward Said defined Orientalism in his seminal work of the same title. *Orientalism* has had a profound effect on scholarship of the Middle East. According to Said, the essence of Orientalism is "an ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Eastern inferiority." It postulates a polarized opposition, moral and epistemological, of East vs. West.⁸¹ Even the concepts of West and East as diametrical opposites are its artificial constructs. Orientalism was an ideology designed for purposes of imperial control. The East became the negative image of the West. The manly valor and love of freedom supposedly characteristic of the Greeks and later Europeans were opposed to the slavish softness of the east. Cruel sensuality and luxurious despotism became stereotypically eastern. Ktesias' *Persika* is rife with this view of the Persians absorbed, undoubtedly, from contemporary opinion, rather than invented by him, as some think.

The role of women in this scenario is notable. Ktesias' royal Persian women were disturbing to the ancient Greeks and to modern historians, and were meant to be. Ktesias was undoubtedly presenting them as specimens of the savagery of barbarian women, and as lessons in the dangers of women having power for the moral pleasure of his Greek audience. Ktesias has a favorite story, which he likes to tell: the

⁸⁰ E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian* (Oxford, 1989); John Coleman, "Ancient Greek Ethnocentrism." In *Greeks and Barbarians: Essays on the Interactions between Greeks and Non-Greeks in Antiquity and the Consequences for Eurocentrism*. Ed John Coleman and Clark Walz, Bethesda, 1997, 175-220.

vindictive queen.⁸² This may have something to do with the fact that he was physician to Parysatis, daughter of Artaxerxes I, the wife of Darius II, and mother of Cyrus the Younger and his brother Artaxerxes II, and had first hand experience of her revenges.

As has been remarked, there are an awful lot of queens and princesses busy in Ktesias' Persian court, conspiring, intriguing, taking revenge, and meting out punishment. This usurpation of kingly power by courtesans and women was assumed to be one of the plainest symptoms of decadence in the empire, and typical of oriental despotism.

During the reign of Artaxerxes I, the Queen-Mother Amestris, the wife of Xerxes, has the Greek doctor Apollonides buried alive for having had an affair with Amytis, the daughter of Xerxes.⁸³ As a fellow doctor in the Persian royal court, his fate must have held a certain malicious piquancy for Ktesias. She has a Caunian crucified for the death of her grandson Zopyrus.⁸⁴ And finally she succeeded in having the Egyptian rebel Inarus and the Greeks, who had surrendered on a promise of safe return home in 454 BC to Megabyzos, Xerxes' brother-in-law and his greatest marshal of the Imperial Army, impaled and crucified.⁸⁵ This betrayal contributed to driving Megabyzos into revolt.⁸⁶

The dowager queen Parysatis was particularly successful in her black-widowly vengeance. Her familial murderousness, which puts one in mind of the homicidal Macedonian ruling houses and the Julio-Claudians, figures large in Photius' epitome. She persuaded Darius II to kill his brother and nephew. They were thrown into the ashpit.⁸⁷ A long vendetta against the family of Stateira, her daughter-in-law and the wife of Artaxerxes II, ensued. She had most of the family buried alive because of a love affair involving Teriteuchmes, Stateira's brother and her son-in-law, and Roxane, sister to Teriteuchmes and Stateira, which involved the attempted murder of Amestris, her daughter and Teriteuchmes' spouse. Roxane was skinned alive and Teriteuchmes' son poisoned.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, those involved in the death of her favored

⁸² Sancisi-Weerdenburg "Decadernce" 40 and "Exit Atossa: Images of Women in Greek Historiography on Persia." In Cameron A., Kuhrt, A. (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London, 1987) 20-33.

⁸³ *FGrH* F14,44.

⁸⁴ *FGrH* F14,44.

⁸⁵ *FGrH* F14,39. Ktesias seems to have related the adventures of Megabyzos at length and with partiality. See Bigwood, 1976, 15-16.

⁸⁶ *FGrH* F14,40.

son Cyrus in his ill-fated revolt were flayed, crucified, or otherwise died cruel deaths when she laid her hands on them. One of them, Mithridates, was eaten alive by flies and vermin.⁸⁹ Finally, she managed to poison Stateira. Ktesias (or Photius) relates with relish a story of a roasted pigeon and a knife with poison smeared on one side.⁹⁰ And in 395 she contrived to have Tissaphernes, satrap of Sardis, and “the ablest and most unscrupulous diplomat that Persia ever produced,” beheaded after reverses in the war with Sparta. Tissaphernes was the last survivor of her hated rival’s family.⁹¹

The Greeks enjoyed these gruesome horror stories and Ktesias enjoyed telling them. The part played by powerful women was the most monstrous aspect of it all. As always with Ktesias, the historical reliability of these accounts is suspect. Nonetheless, they are usually accepted at face value as proof of the decadence of the Achaemenid dynasty. They may be more reflective of Greek literary characterizations and Orientalist conceptions than historical actualities. Given the strict exclusion of women from the political life of the Greek polis, politics was a masculine affair. The repressed returned in Athenian tragedy and comedy in nightmare images of powerful, mad, vengeful, and murderous women.⁹² Among the barbaric other, women run rife. These Persian princesses and queens bodied forth the fears of Greek men. They warned of the folly of allowing women to exercise power. But, the prominent role given in Greek drama and literature to Persian women in high affairs of state, it has been noted, is out of line with the Persian evidence.⁹³

In any case, what we do know of the monarchy from Persian sources for the most part suggests a different picture than extravagant cruelties. More characteristic of the court may have been severe ceremony, sacred ritual, and austere worship of Ahuramazda, Lord Wisdom, as the source of the power and glory with which the Great King ruled as King of Kings and Lord of Asia. The Persians themselves saw their empire as the embodiment of the justice and wisdom flowing from Ahuramazda.

⁸⁹ Plutarch, *Artax.* VXi.

⁹⁰ *FGrH* F27,70.

⁹¹ Plutarch, *Artax.* XXII.

⁹² Indeed, it can be argued that much of what the Greeks knew of the Persians were projections of repressed and latent features of their own culture. See E. Keuls *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (Berkeley,

The kings were a varied lot. Xerxes may have become a legend of hubristic autocracy and Artaxerxes Ochus may have been cruel and bloodthirsty, but Artaxerxes I Longimanus was esteemed for his gentleness and magnanimity and Artaxerxes II had a reputation for mildness and affection for his subjects. At any rate, Plutarch, somewhat ambivalently, depicted him in a humane light.⁹⁴ Darius III seems to have been a man of great nobility of character and was honored as such, to be sure as a diplomatic nicety to a degree, by Alexander.

On the one hand, perhaps Ktesias with his ear to the palace doors was transmitting some valid impressions of court politics. As Sancisi-Weerdenburg observes, women attached to the royal court represented family interest groups. The gossip and tales Ktesias picked up plausibly indicate these domestic power struggles and clashing loyalties, such as we see in the case of Parysatis and Stateira. On the other hand, his tales of harem women, eunuchs, fiendish tortures, effeminate cruelty, and the enervating luxury of the East contra the masculine rigor and virtue of the Greeks was the first full-flushed expression of the image of the "Orient." Which is not to say that crime and brutality did not occur. A psycho-cultural interpretation or recognition of the personal benevolence of the Persian kings is not meant to be a mitigation of the blatant tyrannies of Persian rule.

The work of Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, Amélie Kuhrt, Pierre Briant, and the Achaemenid History Workshop has led the way in revising the common view of decadence: after the assassination of Xerxes in 465, a process of decay set in that rendered the Empire ripe for Macedonian conquest a century later. This view originated with the Greek sources, in which there was a decline from the glory of Cyrus and the organizational skill of Darius through the madness of Cambyses and the megalomania of Xerxes, to the murderous treacheries of the courts of Darius II and Artaxerxes II, and a long erosion of power during the reign of Artaxerxes Memnon. There was a brief revival at the end with Artaxerxes Ochus' reconquest of Egypt in 343 and Darius III, but it was too late to stave off defeat. The Achaemenid Workshop et al. have questioned this assumption of decay as part of the larger project of looking at the Persian Empire from a more Iranocentric point of view.

This tale of decline was the wishful Greek view and the assumption of most treatments up to the present. The Achaemenid Workshop has begun a reevaluation of this hellenocentric image of Iranian history, recognizing how it has colored and shaped our image of the Persians with the ideology and biases of the Greeks. It has moved away from the court-centered history handed down to us by Ktesias to the study of the administrative structures of the Empire as seen from below at the level of the everyday life of its subject peoples. An over-concern with the personalities and politics at the top has obscured understanding of how the imperial machinery of the Empire worked on the ground in Babylonia or Bactria. The Persian state was a superstructure over-arching an economically complex and culturally heterogeneous empire. This vast imperial structure, consolidated over a century and a half, continued to function regardless of plots and intrigues at Susa or Persepolis or the whims of the current occupant of the throne. Comparably, scandals in the White House have little impact on the work-a-day realities of the United States government. But the Greeks in the agora, like Americans in front of their televisions, were fascinated with the scandalous goings-on in the corridors of power. The royal court was only the tip of an iceberg in which few Greek historians had any interest. Modern historians have merely reinforced this shortsighted view with their preoccupation with king and court.

The Persian Empire Revisited

There has been an important shift in the conceptualization of ancient history in recent scholarship. This ^{is} ~~has~~ due to the impact of world history and world systems theory on the field, its concomitant critique of Eurocentrism, and more generally to the emergence of multiculturalism in the culture and in academic study, all of which has fostered rethinking of the old paradigms and reappraisal of non-classical civilizations.⁹⁵

Most ancient history has been written by classical historians from a Greco-Roman perspective. Hellonocentrism—privileging a Greek-centered view of historical events and cultural relations—has

⁹⁵ Some significant and useful works in the field include: *In Civilizations and World Systems: Studying World Historical*

prevailed even in the historiography of the East.⁹⁶ The idea that Near Eastern civilization dominated the brilliant Greeks, or that the Greeks had any connection, or were at all beholden to it, were long fringe positions proposed by mavericks such as Michael Astour and Cyrus Gordon.⁹⁷ All of this has now changed. More particularly, the study of the Persian Empire was deformed by an exclusive concern with Greco-Persian relations. A new Iranocentric perspective has shifted interest to the Persian experience—how the Persians themselves saw and did things.

A primary result of World History has been to break out of the Eurocentrism and Orientalism that set the Greeks at the head of the march of civilization westward from Athens to Rome, to Paris, to London, to New York. This is happening, not coincidentally, when Los Angeles is meeting Tokyo and Beijing. The world systems study of global dynamics is being fruitfully applied to the interactions of Greco-Roman civilization with the rest of the Afro-Eurasian *ecumene*. William McNeill was a pioneer in this field with the publication of *The Rise of the West*. He discarded the model of world history as a procession of civilizations and stressed interconnection and communication. Braudel and the Annales School similarly have shifted our focus to long-term, economic and cultural interactions that transgress states and civilizations.⁹⁸ A world approach looks at how the whole world system fits together into a single Eurasian history. East and West are inextricably bound together such that cultural developments in the ancient Mediterranean become more comprehensible when they are seen as subordinate to, or integral with, Asian developments.

It is now much better understood that what was happening in the Greco-Roman world was not independent of Middle and East Asian developments to the degree usually presumed in western historiography. For instance, as early as 1939, Frederick Teggart had demonstrated such connections in his *Rome and China: A Study of Correlations in Historical Events*. He correlated political and economic events, particularly wars, barbarian invasions, and trade flows/interruptions, between Han China and the Roman Empire.⁹⁹ He showed how events on one end of the Eurasian continent had reverberations on the other end. He proposed a Eurasian history.

⁹⁶ Sancisi-Weerdenburg and Kuhrt, *Achaemenid History* V, ix-xii.

⁹⁷M.C. Astour, *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden, 1967); Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations*. (New York, 1965).

The two parts of Eurasia are inextricably bound together. Mackinder has shown how much light may be thrown on European history by regarding it as subordinate to Asiatic... The oldest of historians (Herodotus) held the idea that epochs of European history were marked by alternating movements across the imaginary line separating East and West.¹⁰⁰

Ancient history is now approached increasingly from an inclusive eastern Mediterranean and Near Eastern point of view. World historians and world-systems theorists have broken out of ideas of the “West” and the “East,” the whole Orientalist dichotomization.¹⁰¹ This effort began in earnest with Samir Amin (1989) in *Eurocentrism* and, most controversially, Martin Bernal (1987) in his *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, who thinks Herodotus was right about the eastern origins of many aspects of Greek culture. Both criticize the imaginary, but powerful boundary set up between East and West. The Greeks invented this imaginary boundary, perhaps just because of their deep political and cultural implication with Eastern civilization, and for purposes of imperial expansion.

Following McNeill, material transcivilizational processes in the entire Afro-Eurasian *ecumene* or world system have become central to the work of world historians. McNeill’s thinking has developed over the years from a civilizational to a transcivilizational model, which stresses the importance of communicational networks. In his famous self-critique “The Rise of the West after twenty-five years,” he concluded that:

Being too much preoccupied by the emergence of “civilization,” I bungled by not giving the initial emergence of a transcivilizational process the sustained emphasis it deserved... In the ancient Middle East, the resulting interactions... led to the emergence of a cosmopolitan world system between 1700 and 500 BC... There is a sense, indeed, in which the rise of civilizations in the Aegean (later Mediterranean) coast lands and in India after 1500 BC were and remained part of the emergent world system centered on the Middle East... All three regions and their peoples remained in close and uninterrupted contact throughout the classical era... Moreover one may, perhaps, assume that a similar [to the modern] primacy for economic exchanges existed also in earlier times all the way back to the earliest beginnings of civilization in ancient Mesopotamia.¹⁰²

McNeill argues for a one-world history encompassing the whole Eurasian *ecumene* with a Middle Eastern core. David Wilkinson calls this core civilization originating from West Asia the “Central

¹⁰⁰ Teggart 248.

¹⁰¹ A reconsideration of spatial and cultural East/West constructs that I have found useful and enlightening is M. Lewis and K. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, 1997).

Civilization.”¹⁰³ Much of the thinking about the separation of western civilization from the East has rested on Orientalist assumptions about the East as unchanging, unprogressive, and essentially other and different. The critique of Eurocentrism and Orientalism in recent historiography has shown these notions to be untenable ideological artifacts of the period of modern Western dominance. A transcivilizational perspective stresses the borrowing and intertextuality at the very core of cultural change.

The World systems theory was developed and used as a description of the modern capitalist world system as an unprecedented social formation. Andre Gunder Frank, however, postulates a world-system stretching back at least 5,000 years. For him, the motor of historical change within this world-system was capital accumulation just as in the modern world-system. In this respect, the ancient world was not as different as has been assumed. However, most scholars do not go as far as he in downplaying the role of politics and ideology within “world empires”. They still insist on capital accumulation has the distinctive feature of the modern world system that arose after 1500 AD Capital accumulation was a subordinate element in ancient political economies.

Samir Amin, instead, advances the useful concept of the tributary system to describe this mode of surplus extraction.¹⁰⁴ There was a world system in the ancient world, but it was not capital intensive like the modern world system.¹⁰⁵ Europe was a cultural and economic peripheral variant of this central tributary system. Amin dates the birth of this central or “Mediterranean system” from the conquests of Alexander the Great (third century BC) and conceptualizes it as a single long historic period running to the Renaissance, encompassing at first the eastern basin of the Mediterranean, then the entire Mediterranean, and finally Medieval Europe and Islam. This was a single tributary system and cultural area unified by the successive ideologies of Hellenism, Eastern and Western Christianity, and Islam. On this view, the Greeks began as a periphery of the Near East, but were drawn into the Middle Eastern core. Tributary culture was fundamentally characterized by the predominance of metaphysical concerns and the

¹⁰³David Wilkison, “Central Civilization,” in *Civilizations and World Systems: Studying World Historical Change*, ed. Stephen Sanderson (Walnut Creek, 1995) 35-57.

¹⁰⁴ Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*. Trans. Russell Moore (New York, 1989) 15-67.

placation of "higher powers" with worshipful sacrifice over capital accumulation as the mode of social cohesion.

World historians and systems theorists reject classical Hellenocentrism as a skewed picture of ancient history. Bernal, Amin, and Frank argue that ancient Greece should be seen not so much as the beginning of western as the continuation of eastern civilization. The economic and cultural, center of gravity in the ancient world remained in the East even after the rise of Hellas, which is attested in the history of the Hellenistic kingdoms.

It can be argued that, even when Rome ascended to political dominance over these Hellenistic kingdoms, the real economic core of this pan-Mediterranean-oriental world system nevertheless decidedly remained in the East whilst Rome itself played a largely parasitic role... Witness the ambition of Antony and Cleopatra to rule this world from the East... the founding of Constantinople as the eastern capital, and its subsequent centuries-long tenure as the premier economic metropolis of the East.¹⁰⁶

Most ancient historians now acknowledge that Greece went through an "orientalizing" period in the Archaic era, but classical Greece is off limits. The influence of West Asia on Aegean civilization is evident. Archaeologists now recognize that it can only be understood within the context of the urban economies and cultures of the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. From the start Greek culture flourished as a brilliant offshoot of Near Eastern civilization.¹⁰⁷

Frank and others go further in insisting that these eastern interactions were equally important in the classical period and later.¹⁰⁸ Hellenic culture in every period was in symbiotic relationship with the East. They have reconsidered Persian political and cultural influence on the Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries with the view that Hellenocentric classicism has distorted the real position of the Greeks in the classical and Hellenistic periods. For, even then, the political-economic center remained in the East. This was why the Greeks, and most famously Alexander, set their sights on conquest in the East: that was where the power and treasure were. The Persian Empire was the superpower of the age and the epicenter of Greek politics. Conflict and concord with the Persians was the main fact of life. Commercial rivalry

¹⁰⁶ Frank 22.

¹⁰⁷ See W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (Cambridge, 1992) and A. Sherratt and S. Sherratt, "From Luxuries to Commodities: The Nature of the Bronze Age Trading System," in *Bronze Age Trade in the Mediterranean*, ed. N.H. Cole,

between the Athenians and the Perso-Phoenicians continued to be of vital importance. Their elimination as commercial competitors was a prime strategic aim of both the Athenians and Alexander.¹⁰⁹ Persian diplomacy and subsidies increasingly became the crucial factor in the struggle for hegemony between the Spartans, Athenians, and Thebans in the fourth century.

The wealth, power, and cultural greatness of the Persian Empire continued to draw many Greeks, like Ktesias of Knidos, into her service as sculptors, artisans, architects, physicians, mercenaries, and courtesans. Given that the most sophisticated and wealthy part of the Greek world—the cities of Asia Minor—had long been under Persian suzerainty, Persian service was an attractive option for many Greeks from Themistocles to Alcibiades, and not manifestly an act of medizing treason. Hellenic culture may have now taken off on its own brilliant trajectory, but economically and politically Hellas was still a semi-peripheral extension of West Asia and a troublesome “frontier” of the Persian Empire.

The purpose of imperial expansion is to incorporate new areas for economic surplus extraction. We see this at work in the rise of the Achaemenid Empire from 505—450 BC, which stabilized West Asia and imposed a more unified political order on the Near Eastern economy. The Persians surpassed the Assyrians in building up a multinational, imperial tribute system that incorporated all the major economic zones from Asia Minor to the Indus and yielded the fabulous wealth and golden luxury of the Persian kings.¹¹⁰ The Persians under Darius the “huckster” and Xerxes logistically integrated the entire Middle East, with infrastructure, roads, the promotion of trade, coinage, and economic expansion, and multiethnic armies.¹¹¹ They built the first great world empire. Frank and others argue that, despite the stress on relations with the Greeks in the West by historians, the Persians’ concerns were often more oriented to the non-Greek parts of the empire: Egypt, Babylonia, Persis, and the Central Asian frontiers.

The failure of the Persian superpower to conquer the western Greeks was the beginning of a hegemonic shift that eventuated in Macedonian rule over both Greece and Persia. As has been pointed out, the Greek conquest of the Persian Empire was the resolution of Greek social and economic crises. The land and wealth of the East fell into the hands of new Macedonian ruling classes. Under the new

¹⁰⁹ Frank 158-163.

management of the Seleucids, the old Persian organizational structures continued to function. It might be said that Greece now underwent a new phase of “orientalizing,” under Hellenistic monarchy. Culturally speaking, Hellenism became hegemonic; while syncretism occurred, it was mostly through the efforts of Hellenizing natives.¹¹²

The reversals in the West in 490 and 480 do not appear to have been serious blows to the empire. It went on to become the arbiter of Greece and to achieve in the years to come a diplomatic and fiscal supremacy over the mainland Greeks. The Persians had other fish to fry. What was happening in other parts of the Empire was at least as important as the Greek frontier, if not more so. Hellenocentric history has obscured this fact.¹¹³ Until the rise of the Macedonian threat, the empire largely was impervious to the Greeks, and was not in a state of decadence. One of the useful features of Ktesias’ account is its accent on affairs in these other parts of the Empire, for instance, the activities of Cyrus on the eastern frontiers.

The stress on the Near Eastern orientation of the Persian Empire is maintained by recent work on the Hellenistic successor kingdom.¹¹⁴ Sherwin-White and Kuhrt have contended that the Seleucid empire, as heir to the Persian was similarly an eastern empire centered in the Middle East. Mesopotamia, Syria, and Western Iran formed the core of this enormous realm. Asia Minor and the Greeks was the outer frontier of the kingdom as it had been for the Achaemenids. Furthermore, it is mistaken to see the Hellenistic kingdom as a new departure in Middle Eastern history. This notion is derived from the untenable but tenacious idea that the Greeks were more advanced politically, culturally, and economically than the conquered peoples of the East. It overlooks the fact that a cosmopolitan urban civilization with its own distinctive languages, religions, arts, and culture stretching back three thousand years was in already place and that the Persians had united the many peoples and states of the region for the first time within one imperial system. The Persians built on a political heritage of kingship, administration, taxes, roads, warfare, population control, and royal ideology inherited from the Assyrians and Babylonians. City life, coinage, slavery, markets, trade, all the innovations usually attributed to the Greeks, had been introduced by the

¹¹¹ S. Sherwin-White and A. Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (Berkeley, 1993) 1-2; M.A. Dandamaev, *A Political History of the Achaemenid Empire*, trans. W.J. Vogelsang (Leiden, 1989) xi.

¹¹² Frank 21, 161-162.

Persians or had been features of Middle Eastern life for centuries. The imperial organization that the Persians had devised became the foundation of the Seleucid kingdom.

Recent work begins with several premises. The Persian Empire in the fourth century was not in decline but was still a going concern despite problems with containing nationalist resistance. The institutions of the empire were highly developed, still quite successful, and were adapted as such by the Seleucids. The pet belief that Alexander brought the light of Greek civilization to peoples sunk in bankrupt despotism, long characteristic of study of the Hellenistic East, is unsatisfactory. And the realities of Middle Eastern life have been missed by an exclusive focus by Greco-Roman historians on relations with the Greeks.

This inadequacy has begun to be remedied by the collective work of Assyriologists, Iranologists, biblical scholars, Near Eastern philologists and archaeologists penetrating behind the screen of Ktesian Orientalism. The *Persika* was a major source for the Hellenistic and Roman universal historians. They tried to encompass the whole history of the world, as they knew it, drawing heavily on Ktesias. Ktesias poured his picture of the ancient empires of the east, compounded as it was out of legends, myths, traditions, gossip, and scandal, and fitted into Greek presuppositions and biases, into the historiographical stream at its source, both enriching and polluting it.

Ted Benke
30 April 2001

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