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L'empire perse, les Grecs et le politique

Alexandre Tourraix, *L'empire perse, les Grecs et le politique*. Institut des sciences et techniques de l'Antiquité, 1544. Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2021. Pp. 436. ISBN 9782848678610

Review by

Steven W. Hirsch, Tufts University. steven.hirsch@tufts.edu

This book is the product of deep learning and research. Its overall aim is to reconstruct the history and political thought of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. It rejects the common tendency to do so largely on the basis of Greek sources, given that very little written evidence exists from the Persian side other than a few dozen royal inscriptions. Tourraix draws upon the growing body of archaeological and epigraphical evidence, as well as texts from throughout the Near East (e.g. Mesopotamian, Elamite). He engages in an “archaeology” of Greek texts, arguing that traditions can be seen as laid down in a sedimentary fashion, overlaying and merging until being written down. Moreover, he does not privilege Herodotus over other Greek sources (including the often-suspect Ctesias of Cnidus, whose *Persika* survives, in part, in later Greek sources) since the various Greek traditions were largely based on oral traditions circulating in the Persian Empire. These traditions are, in most cases, not historically accurate, but they do reflect the stories circulating orally at the time and their underlying ideological components. The result is both an enhanced understanding of the Greek view of Persian civilization (as Tourraix says in the introductory chapter, the Greeks were stunned by the power of the Persian Empire, stimulating them to much political thought) and a new perspective on the Achaemenid Empire that is more Iranian and Near Eastern and less Greek.

That said, this is not an easy book to read. While it does have a strong and broad general thesis, the density of material, including much that could have been put in footnotes or appendices, makes it harder for the reader to follow the general argument. I am tempted to say that the book could be a marvelous resource for researchers, insofar as it seems to tackle virtually every conceivable question about the Achaemenids (and their Median predecessors) with abundant references, but the lack of an index makes it hard to use in that way. While many of the particulars of Tourraix's comprehensive approach are speculative (and given the state of our sources, there is little alternative to intelligent speculation), there is much of value in these pages.

The book is divided into five parts—a relatively short Introduction and General Conclusion bracketing three lengthy chapters: “The Empire of Numbers,” “The Best Constitution,” and “The Typology of Median and Persian Kingship.” There is also a substantial bibliography.

Chapter 1, “The Empire of Numbers,” maintains that the Persians were “obsessed” by quantity—the riches, peoples, armies, palaces, paradises, and concubines of the Great King—which they equate with power. To the Greeks, a single ruler with multitudinous subjects was a paradox, and the fabulously wealthy and powerful Persian monarch was almost god-like, his subjects virtually slaves. Ultimately, the Greeks fundamentally misunderstood the dynamics of power in the Persian monarchy, attributing too much influence to conniving royal women and too little to administrators and counselors at court. Tourraix illustrates this point by a detailed treatment of the events relating to the reign of Cambyses and the eventual succession of Darius in 522. He ultimately claims that Cambyses employed the Mesopotamian ritual of the substitute-king, a

scapegoat whose death in the ruler's place safeguards the latter, to eliminate his brother and rival, Bardiya, but then lost control of the situation by his untimely death, allowing the substitute, Gaumata (according to Darius' Behistun inscription), to rule for a time before being overthrown by Darius and a group of high-ranking Persian nobles. It is an intriguing thesis, one that gives more credit to Darius' account (which is the ultimate source of the version in Herodotus) than most commentators, who find the story dubious. Such a detailed treatment might have worked better in a monograph rather than as part of a larger argument about Persian royal ideology. As an example of excessive detail—valuable in its own right but interfering with the flow of the argument—when Tourraix discusses the identities of Darius' co-conspirators, he must spend three pages analyzing their names, and, when he mentions the thigh wound that Cambyses died from, he looks at the parallel thigh wound that killed the Athenian Miltiades, Jupiter sewing the infant Dionysus into his thigh, and the use of thigh bones in the Greek ritual of animal sacrifice.

In the second chapter, "The Best Constitution," Tourraix tackles the much-discussed "Constitutional Debate" in which, in Herodotus's account, Darius and his noble Persian co-conspirators, after slaying the Magus who is posing as Cambyses' brother Smerdis, debated whether the new government should be an oligarchy, a democracy, or a monarchy. The debate is so clearly predicated on Greek political concepts that even in Herodotus's time some Greeks doubted its veracity, as do most contemporary scholars. But Herodotus insists so strongly on the truth of the tale that we have to assume he had what he regarded as a reliable source—perhaps a bilingual Persian who cast the story in terms he thought Greeks would understand. Tourraix maintains that the Greeks, attuned to the polis and the rise of democracies across the Greek world, were perplexed by the secrecy and aloofness of the Persian king from his subjects, and could not imagine a change of government taking place without a debate on alternative solutions. On the other hand, the Behistun inscription shows Darius very much in control. Indeed, Darius is presenting himself as a new founder/organizer, a traditional Indo-European and Iranian function of kings, along with being a military leader and promoting economic abundance. Tourraix is willing to concede that some kind of discussion might really have taken place at such a crucial moment, albeit involving Iranian categories and concepts. While the Persian word "kara" in the royal inscriptions can mean "the army" or "the people," there is no evidence of any sort of "assembly." Tourraix emphasizes that the major alternatives in Herodotus's account of the debate are democracy and monarchy, whereas within the world of the Greek poleis the contending categories were democracy and oligarchy. So Herodotus is using the debate as a vehicle for interpreting the events of 522 and the nature of the Persian monarchy. In the end, Tourraix argues, the "debate," while not authentic, has a conceptual validity as a moment of decision in the Persian Empire.

In the third chapter, "The Typology of Median and Persian Kingship," Tourraix surveys the reigns of Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius and Xerxes, showing how each conformed to one or more aspects of the tripartite schema of kingship. Cyrus is a founder, Cambyses a warrior, Darius with his reorganization of provinces and tribute a creator of abundance (though all are also warriors, and Darius can be seen as a second founder figure).

Cyrus became a major figure in Greek political reflection (and not just in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*). The Akkadian legend of Sargon, abandoned as a child only to reach an imperial throne eventually, is transferred to him. And Herodotus gives as much space to legends of his youth as to his reign. Herodotus knows multiple versions of the death of Cyrus, all of Iranian origin according to Tourraix. When all is said and done, it is surprising that so little is known about Cyrus's real reign by Greeks writing a century later.

The Greek tradition was not kind to Cambyses, taking over the hostile assertions of Egyptians still smarting after suppression of a revolt in the 480s and the propaganda found in the Behistun inscription. Contemporary documents from Egypt suggest that, like his father in Babylon, Cambyses actually showed respect for local traditions and was conciliatory toward the Egyptian priestly class.

Herodotus is apparently unaware of how much resistance Darius had to overcome in his early years on the throne, as evidenced by the Behistun inscription. Thus he treats him more as an organizer and bringer of prosperity than a warrior-king, though he significantly expanded the empire, and focuses on his military failures in Scythia and Greece. The strange story in Herodotus about how Darius's horse and groom won him the throne may evoke Indo-European rituals of horse-divination.

Tourraix points up how the character of Xerxes varies greatly between Aeschylus in the *Persians*, where he is a weak warrior and failed king, and Herodotus's more complex treatment, in which Xerxes is not just a warrior-king but a skilled negotiator and alliance-maker, qualities of the monarch who brings abundance to his subjects. Xerxes follows his father's path in many respects, and his inscriptions are mostly concerned with his accession and building projects. Tourraix thinks Xerxes may have been disinclined to further expansion of the empire but was pressured by many at court. The frightening dreams that appear to Xerxes and then to his uncle, Artabanus, again are connected to the Babylonian ritual of the royal scapegoat in which someone impersonates the king in order to protect him from harm. In sum, Xerxes represents all three royal functions as organizer, warrior and creator of prosperity. Normally a ruler who fails in the latter task loses his throne, and, while Herodotus doesn't narrate it, Xerxes was later assassinated.

In the "General Conclusion," Tourraix maintains that the Greeks received stories from the East that placed rulers into one (or more) of the tripartite functions—founder/organizer, warrior, and bringer of prosperity (or failure to do so). Because they often do not understand some of the significances of things (like the Babylonian ritual of the royal scapegoat that may have been connected to the death of Cambyses' brother, Bardiya, but that in Greek minds manifested as a Magus impersonating Bardiya), structural facts of a political, social, or cultural order are transformed into events and anecdotes.

In the end, this is a book for those who already have considerable background regarding Persians, Greeks, and other peoples of the Near East. Whether looking at Tourraix's treatment of a specific problem or evaluating his more general theses, they will find his discussions stimulating and, at times, provocative.