

Matt Waters, *Ancient Persia: A Concise History of the Achaemenid Empire, 550-330 BCE*. Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0-21-2369-7. Pp. xx + 252. 28 illustrations and 5 maps. \$76.50 (hardcover), \$26.09 (paperback).

The Achaemenid Persian Empire—the Persian Empire of the 6th through 4th centuries BCE—was the first “world empire”, stretching across three continents from the Indus River to the Danube and from the western edge of the Himalayas to the Sahara desert and comprising scores of different ethnic groups. As Matt Waters notes, “its scope and durability, and...its ability to project and maintain its power” were unprecedented. Unfortunately, there is all too meager documentary evidence for its history, at least for a history which does justice to the empire’s many parts and peoples. Classical sources dating from the 5th century BCE (Herodotus) to the 2nd century CE (Arrian) furnish the greater part of our knowledge, particularly of individual Persians and of many of the great Persian military enterprises. Beyond these we have a handful of royal inscriptions, a trove of economic records from Persepolis, scrappy remnants of archives, references in Hebrew scripture, entries in Babylonian astronomical diaries, all of these encompassing a variety of languages and scripts. Specialists (in increasing numbers over the last generation or so) have worked assiduously on these materials, and most of the original source material has been published in accessible form in Amelie Kuhrt’s *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*. Pierre Briant has dealt at great length with virtually all the interpretive problems in his indispensable, but very lengthy work *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Achaemenid Empire*. Those wishing for a more compact introductory overview have in recent years been able to turn to J. M. Cook’s *The Persian Empire* (1983) or M. Brosius’ *The Persians: An Introduction* (2006). The first, however, lacks the benefit of recent scholarship, and the latter, while valuable and reliable, deals with the Parthians and Sasanian Persians as well as the Achaemenid Persians and is thus rather brief.

Matt Waters’ *Ancient Persia: A Concise History of the Achaemenid Empire, 550-330 BCE* is therefore a most useful and timely contribution. It is concise—a little over 200 pages of text broken into 11 relatively short chapters (typically 20 pages each or less) plus a very brief epilogue. The author organizes his history of the Persian Empire largely as biography. He follows successive kingships in successive chapters, but he also treats the history of empire itself as the story of a life with its successive stages—a period of gestation leading to birth, a period of growth and development, a period of full maturity with component elements well-integrated and functioning effectively, and then death.

After alerting readers in Chapter 1 to the difficulties and limitations of the sources and warning that his interpretations should be taken as “no more than an introductory word”, Waters turns in Chapter 2 to antecedents or to what might be called the genealogy of the Persian Empire. He quickly surveys the forerunners of the Persians, the Elamites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Lydians, and Medes, whose territories became part of the Persian Empire and many of whose administrative and cultural practices the Persians adopted or adapted. Particularly notable here is the attention given to the

Elamites, the dominant pre-Persian power in southwestern Iran—the Persian homeland—and to the evolving explanations of Median power and success in overcoming their Assyrian overlords. In Chapter 3, Waters recounts the birth of the Persian Empire in the conquests of Cyrus II, the Persian King of Anshan in Parsa (Fars) in southwestern Iran. The result is clear: between 550 and 530 BCE already existing empires, those of the Medes, the Lydians, and Babylonians, as well as lands in eastern Iran and Central Asia, fell one after another into Persian hands. The details are not always clear, and Waters does an excellent job of noting the various problems—the lack of any confirmation in Near Eastern sources of Herodotus’ account of Cyrus’ prior subordination to the Median king, the variant possible datings of Cyrus’ Lydian campaign due to the possible reading of either Lydia or Urartu in a damaged passage in a Babylonian chronicle for 547, the dearth of details or chronological information about Cyrus’ activities in the east, the lack of evidence regarding the preliminaries of the Persian-Babylonian conflict culminating in Cyrus’ occupation of Babylon in 539. Cyrus summed up his accomplishments in an inscription stamped on temple bricks at Ur:

Cyrus, King of the World, King of Anshan, the son of Cambyses, King of Anshan. The great gods have delivered all the lands into my hands, and I caused the land to live in peace.

Waters’ analysis of this short inscription adds valuable insights into the birth process. The use of a stamped inscription (a common practice of Mesopotamia rulers) and the presence of archaic sign forms (evoking a connection to the earliest kings in the Mesopotamian tradition) reflect Cyrus’ adoption and adaptation of “older forms to legitimize himself and to locate Persian rule within Mesopotamian norms, while employment of the title “King of Anshan” (a modification of the traditional Elamite title “King of Anshan and Susa”) provides “compelling testimony to the Elamite-Persian acculturation that lay at the root of the Achaemenid Persian Empire’s history.”

Cyrus died in 530 BCE, campaigning against the Massagetae, a people dwelling in what is now Kazakhstan. But the growth phase of the Persian Empire continued over the next 40 years and the author recounts in Chapters 4 and 5 further military enterprises undertaken by the next two kings, Cambyses and Darius, Cambyses’ conquest of Egypt and Darius’ extension of boundaries in every direction from southeastern Europe to the Indus River valley. Most remarkable in this phase was Darius’ usurpation of the kingship from the family of Cyrus and his successful overcoming of widespread opposition over the course of about a year (522). Darius’ linked himself to his predecessors (Cyrus, Cambyses, and the mysterious Bardiya, probably a briefly ruling brother of Cambyses) through marriages to various of their daughters and wives, but the usurpation established a number of new families at the center of imperial power where most of them would remain generation after generation.

Having followed the growth of the empire to its greatest extent under Darius, Waters interrupts his diachronic narrative and devotes Chapter 6 to an examination of the

mechanics of empire through brief, but very informative sections on the court, the system of satrapal or provincial administration, tribute, the army, and the all important road system. This is precisely the middle chapter of the book and appropriately so since it is only under Darius that the system of administration that will last for the rest of the life of the empire is fully established.

Darius' son and successor Xerxes, whose reign is the subject of Chapter 7, is of course well known for the 480–479 invasion of Greece which he prepared and led and which is so memorably recounted in Herodotus' history. Waters does not downplay the significance of this for Greek history, but he emphasizes the role of Persian and more generally Near Eastern ideology which cast the king as “expander of the realm” and demanded that “Xerxes had to develop his father's territorial dominion further”. Actually, this was accomplished largely through Persian demands for “earth and water”—signs of submission from Greek city-states, so that the main military goal of the expedition was the defeat and destruction of Athens. Consequently, Waters characterizes Xerxes' campaign with its extended preparations and multitudinous troops as “a display of Persian might and grandeur as much as a military expedition”. The failure of the campaign did not prevent Xerxes from presenting himself as expander of empire by claiming responsibility for adding two new peoples to the list of those controlled by the Persians.

Expansion and, indeed, the tradition of inscribing lists of subject peoples to attest expansion of the realm cease with Xerxes, a sign of the onset of the mature stage of empire, marked by maintenance rather than growth. The author pauses again to consider distinctive Achaemenid Persian aspects of the empire, describing the features and functions of the important royal capitals, the three inherited from predecessors—Susa, Ecbatana, and Babylon—rather briefly and the two new Persian foundations of Parsagadae and Persepolis more extensively. Then Achaemenid religion, meaning Zoroastrianism, where amid all the controversy about the dating of Zoroaster, the nature and role of the magi, the persistence of Elamite practices and sacred places, Waters suggests the best approach is one which accepts a fluid, evolving set of ideas and practices and advises that “instead of forcing the Achaemenids into a preconceived Zoroastrian system, we should consider the Achaemenid impact on a still nascent and evolving tradition.” Zoroastrianism's stark cosmic dichotomy pitting Ahuramazda as the Good, the Truth, and the Light against Ahriman, Evil, the Lie, and Darkness personified, provided the Achaemenids, starting with Cyrus, with a very useful means of legitimizing themselves as agents of Ahuramazda and demonizing any and all opponents as adherents of Ahriman. In this sense Zoroastrianism under the Achaemenids was an imperial religion and not one which demanded adherence by Achaemenid subjects.

Over the course of Chapters 9 and 10, Waters treats the reigns of Artaxerxes I, Darius II, Artaxerxes II, and Artaxerxes III. This is a long period—from 464 through 338 BC—known almost entirely from Greek sources and thus inviting a hellenocentric treatment. Waters counters that tendency very well by dividing each of these chapters into sections

devoted to a number of different topics (and here making the most of non-Greek source material) and dealing with Persian and Greek affairs only intermittently in distinct sections whose headings always refer to “the Northwestern Frontier” to remind readers that dealings with Greeks were a regional matter and not the whole of Persian involvements or concerns.

The book’s last chapter is entitled “The Twilight of the Achaemenids”. This involves the final stage in the life story of the Achaemenid Empire, but Waters eschews the conventional approach of looking for evidence of senescence and debility to account for ultimate demise. Instead Waters appropriately looks at what really counted—the rise of Macedon and Macedonian achievements under Alexander on the battlefield. Nevertheless, in Waters’ telling, it is still a Persian-centered drama, in which a resilient and resourceful Darius III moves from one strategy to another (possibly including, Waters notes, an effort “to circumvent horrible omens and the coming disaster that was Alexander” by changing places with a “substitute-king”, a traditional Near Eastern ritual), aiming finally at utilizing the resources of the eastern satrapies against Alexander’s continued advance. The end came only when high officials killed Darius to stall Alexander’s pursuit and allow them to reach and prepare to meet Alexander in the eastern satrapies. Alexander has to fight on, but Darius III’s death marked the death of the Achaemenid Empire and Waters’ halts his history here and uses a brief epilogue to note Alexander’s Persianizing policies and the post-Achaemenid, post-Alexander future of the Near East.

With its concise narrative, its basic examinations of aspects of Achaemenid military and administrative practices, ideology, and religion, its sustained effort to locate these in an expansive Near Eastern context, its very clear and detailed maps, and its numerous illustrations, Waters’ book provides the best introduction to the history of the Achaemenid Empire.

STEPHEN RUZICKA
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO