

Pierre Briant. *Kings, Countries, Peoples. Selected Studies on the Achaemenid Empire. (Oriens et Occidens 26)*. Translated by Amélie Kuhrt. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag. 2017. ISBN 978-3-515-11628-2. Pp. 659.

Pierre Briant, emeritus chaire d'histoire et civilisation du monde achéménide et l'empire d'Alexandre at the Collège de France, has exercised a formative influence on the study of Achaemenid Persia and the Hellenistic Near East over a prolific fifty-year career.¹ This volume assembles a broad selection of his papers from the 1970s to the 2000s, presented in crisp English translation by Amélie Kuhrt, herself a preeminent contributor to these fields. The collection will be invaluable for Anglophone students who may be more familiar with Briant's (henceforth P.B.'s) translated monographs, facilitating the dissemination of a wider range of his scholarship to advanced undergraduates and graduate students who might not yet have mastered the linguistic skills necessary to read these works in their original form. It does a great service to professional ancient historians by assembling publications from numerous Festschriften and edited volumes in one convenient collection; together, they offer an invaluable survey of P.B.'s evolving thought on key strands in his scholarship.²

A foreword introduces the themes under discussion and engages in dialogue with more recent scholarship on relevant topics. In particular, it reiterates and defends P.B.'s position on the continuities between the Persian monarchy and the empire of Alexander, to whom he famously referred in 1979 as both “the first of a long line of Hellenistic rulers” and the “last of the Achaemenids” (see Chapter 20). P.B. addresses what he considers polemical misrepresentations of the latter phrase by some classical scholars, stressing that he does not advocate the separation of Alexander from his Macedonian background, but rather the necessity of studying this background in combination with the Achaemenid contexts for the imperial transition period of the late fourth century. P.B.'s 1987 paper on “Central Power and Cultural Polycentrism in the Achaemenid Empire” then offers further introduction as a point of entry for several key topics, from the dynamics of center-periphery relations to the long-term stability of the Achaemenid dynasty. Some of its assertions, notably the model of a Persian “ethno-classe dominante” closed off from intermarriage and assimilation with provincial subjects, are revised in later chapters based on newer evidence, helping readers to trace the evolution of P.B.'s thought; yet there is overall continuity in both the topics under consideration and the methods applied to the contextualizing of Greek evidence against the Egyptian and Near Eastern documentation.

¹ See pp. IX–XXIV for a comprehensive list of publications including forthcoming works; it is also worth stressing the invaluable role of his Achemenet website (www.achemenet.com) as a digital meeting space for the international Achaemenid research community.

² A second collection of P.B.'s works, comprising fourteen additional articles not included in *Kings, Countries, Peoples*, has just appeared as *From Cyrus to Seleukos: Studies in Achaemenid and Hellenistic History. Ancient Iran Series 5* (UCI Jordan Center for Persian Studies, 2018).

The subsequent papers are grouped in five thematic sections. Part One deals with Achaemenid Asia Minor, and more specifically, epigraphic case studies in the interactions between local cults and Persian administrators. Each paper challenges earlier scholarship that had postulated a high degree of Persian state involvement in provincial religious affairs, and argues for more cautious readings of the evidence that support a pattern of semi-autonomy in non-Iranian cultic activity. P.B. views the Lycian-Greek-Aramaic trilingual from the Letoon of Xanthos as a case of cult establishment by local authorities who appealed to Pixodaros for legitimization, rather than an imposition on the Lycians by their satrap (Chapter 3); the Iranian “hyparch” Droaphernes’ dedication to Zeus at Sardis is interpreted as private devotion to a local deity rather than an administrative offering or evidence of a syncretized Ahuramazda cult (Chapter 2). The most dramatic case involves a famed inscription preserving an alleged letter of Darius I, which reprimands the governor Gadatas for insufficient benevolence towards Apollo’s cult at Magnesia; P.B. famously reinterprets the text as a Roman-era forgery that cannot shed light on genuine Achaemenid practice (Chapter 4). This 2003 article provoked some critical reactions (to which P.B. responds in the foreword at note 34); the most recent and detailed, by Christopher Tuplin, agrees on some troubling features of the inscription’s language but comes down against a decisive case for inauthenticity.³ Yet P.B.’s concerns remain significant enough to deter uncritical reliance on the Gadatas letter as a straightforward Achaemenid document, and illustrate the necessity of methodological caution in the use of late epigraphic evidence for the Persian period.⁴

Part Two turns to Achaemenid Egypt in a series of studies that use the Nile province as a test case for center-province relations, exploring the necessarily “two-faced” nature of Persian power, which asserted imperial authority while also pursuing political legitimacy in Egyptian terms. P.B.’s emphasis on the two-tiered nature of Persian governance in Egypt, with Iranians in the highest ranks and Egyptians in middling and lower positions of administration, is borne out by more recent scholarship on the Demotic evidence.⁵ On the other hand, his understanding of the social exclusivity of the Persian elites in Egypt (Chapter 5) has evolved in light of the Saqqara Stele’s evidence for mixed marriage and greater complexity in ethnic identities (Chapter 8). At several points P.B. challenges simplistic views of Egyptian “nationalist” hostility to “foreign occupation” by Persia, stressing the danger of trusting such ideological assertions in Ptolemaic-era sources (Chapter 7). A particularly important article is P.B.’s study of the notorious dispute between

³ “The Gadatas Letter,” in *Greek History and Epigraphy: Essays in Honour of P.J. Rhodes*, edited by L. Mitchell and L. Rubinstein (Swansea 2009), 155–184.

⁴ On the reception and use of Achaemenid history in later periods of ancient history, see now R. Strootman and M.J. Versluys (eds.), *Persianism in Antiquity* (Stuttgart 2017).

⁵ See Damien Agut-Labordère, “Administrating Egypt under the First Persian Period. The Empire as visible in the Demotic Sources,” in *Administration in the Achaemenid Empire: Tracing the Imperial Signature*, edited by B. Jacobs, W. Henkelman, and M. Stolper (Wiesbaden 2017), 677–697, at 689.

Egyptians and Judaeans over the Elephantine temple, in which he challenges the Judaeans' characterization of an abusive Persian official corrupted by Egyptian bribery, and demonstrates the close adherence of the Persian garrison commander to Egyptian legal precedent (Chapter 6). Overall, P.B.'s Perso-Egyptian studies illustrate sensitive approaches to scarce and challenging evidence through careful attention to context and the sources' ideological agendas.

In Part Three, P.B. assembles studies on the Great King's interactions with Achaemenid agricultural and hydrological resources. These include an essay on sheep-breeding (Chapter 10) that offers a glimpse into P.B.'s early engagement with the Persepolis Fortification tablets in the decade after Hallock's initial publication.⁶ The other papers include a reexamination of the royal gardener image in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, which demonstrates the dangers of efforts to read this theme into iconographic materials (Chapter 11); and a study of the symbolic resonance of the King's long-distance transportation and consumption of water from the River Choaspes (Chapter 12). Finally, P.B. presents three related case studies on the eastern Iranian qanāt system and its description in Polybius 10.28, which misinterprets some of the technical details but preserves evidence for the continuing importance of qanāts for both Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid societies (Chapters 13-15). These essays not only shed light on center-periphery relations (through the argument that the Persian administration delegated the construction of qanāts to the local communities which they benefited), but also illustrate P.B.'s contextualizing approach to post-Classical Greek evidence; finally, they explore representations of Ancient Near Eastern societies and economies in modern Western thought, from Montesquieu to Marx and beyond.

The papers in Part Four engage with the multifaceted evidence for Achaemenid communications and economic exchange. P.B. discusses the Herodotean "royal road" alongside the travel ration tablets from the Persepolis Fortification Archive, illuminating the inner workings of imperial travel authorization and demonstrating the extent of a highway network that stretched far beyond Herodotus' Sardis to Susa corridor (Chapter 16). In a definitive study of the imperial customs account TAD C3.7 (Chapter 18), P.B. and Raymond Descat examine its evidence for maritime trade and tolls against the Egyptian and Achaemenid administrative contexts, locate the

⁶ See Richard Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (Chicago, 1969). Publication of the remaining tablets continues through the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project; preliminary editions are available on the public OCHRE database (http://ochre.lib.uchicago.edu/PFA_Online/) and 207 of the completed publications are presented on Achemenet. For P.B.'s contributions to the study of the archive, see especially Chapter 11 of *Histoire de l'Empire Perse* (Paris, 1996)/*From Cyrus to Alexander: a History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, 2002); others include *L'archive des Fortifications de Persépolis. État des questions et perspectives de recherches* (Persika 12), edited by P.B. with Wouter Henkelman and Matthew Stolper (Paris, 2008), and most recently, "De Samarkand à Sardis via Persépolis dans les traces des Grands Rois et d'Alexandre," in *Administration in the Achaemenid Empire* (cit. n. 5 above), 827–855.

relevant customs station at Thonis at the Canopic mouth of the Nile,⁷ and illuminate Persia's profit from engagement with the maritime economies of the eastern Mediterranean. The last point is also important for P.B.'s study of tribute and exchange (Chapter 19), which illustrates Achaemenid administrators' ability to sell surplus agricultural income in exchange for silver.

Part Five displays P.B.'s particular interest in the fourth-century transition from the Achaemenid to the Hellenistic kingdoms. He stresses that the Diadochic transition should not be viewed in terms of its violence alone, but rather in the larger areas of social, economic, and political developments, and the "interplay" between their Near Eastern, Greek, and Macedonian origins. A recurrent theme throughout these nine chapters is a warning against an artificial periodization that separates the Achaemenids from the states of Alexander, the Diadochi, and the Seleucids. P.B. attributes the origins of this insight to Mikhail Rostovtseff, who was ahead of his time in calling for study of the Hellenistic world's Persian precedents, even if he did not take up this challenge in his own work (Chapter 21). In some of the chapters that follow, P.B. approaches the transition period through regional case studies focusing on Asia Minor, which examine the evolving status of internal civic structures at Sardis (Chapters 23-24), Persian elite acculturation in Greek communities (Chapter 25), and the Achaemenid as well as Macedonian precedents for "semi-private" royal domain lands attested under the early Hellenistic monarchs (Chapter 26). P.B. stresses the need to "distinguish between borrowings and convergences" when examining the Persian-Macedonian transition; he warns against simplistic derivations of Alexander's institutions from Achaemenid roots, pointing to complex examples such as the office of chiliarch and the institution of the royal pages (Chapter 22). But he also demonstrates important points of continuity, above all in his final and most recent chapter, an excerpt from a longer study on the precedents for Alexander's treatment of the *katarraktai*, artificial barriers on the Tigris allegedly demolished by the Macedonian conqueror (Chapter 28). Overturning Arrian's image of Alexander's destruction of Achaemenid fortifications that impeded local commerce and prosperity, with its implications of a Western conqueror's introduction of a new economic rationalism in the Near East, P.B. deploys Mesopotamian evidence to prove that these were temporary dams constructed and deconstructed on a regular basis to support the effectiveness of local agriculture; Alexander's removal was thus an annual routine performed in accordance with long-standing regional practice rather than a break between a "stagnant" Near Eastern past and "rational" Hellenizing present.

Kings, Countries, Peoples offers a representative sample of P.B.'s voluminous work, to which it is impossible to do full justice in a brief review. This sweeping collection offers deep insights on many different points of Achaemenid and Hellenistic history. While the foreword engages in measured defense of several positions against P.B.'s

⁷ For confirmation of this identification by new evidence, see F. Goddio and M. Clauss, *Ägyptens versunkene Schätze* (Munich 2006), 312.

critics (see notes 34, 80-81, 91), the overall emphasis is on methodological exploration that lays the groundwork for further research in these fields. P.B.'s work offers stimulation and encouragement to future generations of scholars, who, it is to be hoped, will build on his foundations in breaking down interdisciplinary boundaries and developing innovative approaches to the history of the Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds.

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