



1

Introduction

The first Persian empire, which is known as the Achaemenid empire after the eponymous ancestor Achaemenes, was founded in 550 by Cyrus II. He is one of the few rulers in world history who received the epithet 'the Great'. It is more than apt. Cyrus II established an empire which, at its largest extent, stretched from Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean to the Indus River. It included the whole of modern Turkey and Europe to the Danube River; it controlled the lands of Central Asia now bordering on Russia. If the conquests themselves were an impressive achievement, it was at least equally formidable that this empire remained in the control of one dynasty for over 200 years, until its conquest by Alexander III of Macedon and the death of its last king, Darius III, in 330. It was Cyrus II who set the course for the success of a political concept which ensured the longevity of his empire, which, at its core, was characterised by tolerance: the subject peoples of the empire were allowed to continue their own way of life, adhere to their own languages, follow their own religious cults and practices and maintain their own cultural habitat. This is not to claim that Cyrus II and his successors, far ahead of their time, were enlightened or humane rulers. Rather, their decision to tolerate other peoples' and nations' beliefs and cultural habits was anchored in the concept of political expediency. The less state force was used on the inhabitants of any land, the less likely was the chance of opposition to the governing power. Permitting people their own language, culture and religion greatly reduced the grounds for resistance to Persian rule.

There were two areas where this political tolerance met its limits: in the payment of taxes and tribute, and in rebellion. While there is no record that any of the lands of the empire ever refused the former, rebellions did happen, and they were severely punished. Persian kings did not tolerate disloyalty or disobedience, and any land which tried to secede from the empire faced a relentless Persian might, no matter how long it took to recover a province. The most extreme case undoubtedly was Egypt, never a willing subject of the Persian king, but which began a revolt in 404 which was only quashed in 343/2 by Artaxerxes III. While such rebellions were staged in a bid for independence, others were directed at the king, challenging his authority. Several revolts occurred in

the period between the death of one king and the accession of his successor. If that succession was not clear-cut, that is, if there was no son alive born to the king and his Persian queen, the succession was fought over by half-brothers, leading to rebellion or, in the case of Artaxerxes II and his brother Cyrus the Younger, to war. Yet despite these upheavals, royal power remained within the same dynasty and often led to long reigns, such as that of Artaxerxes I, who ruled for 40 years, or that of Artaxerxes II, whose reign lasted 45 years.

Royal inscriptions and the palatial building programme reflect an inherent sense of continuity among the Achaemenid kings and an awareness of the place they took within their own imperial history. The 'king of kings' was eager to manifest his heritage and his position within the line of kings his family had created. Building projects begun by his predecessor were proudly completed, and existing palaces restored, remembering the ancestor who had built it. At their investiture, the kings observed a ritual in Pasargadae, the first royal city of the Persians, in commemoration of the founder of the empire, Cyrus II.

For many scholars, students and general readers, especially in the western world, the Persian empire conjures up two images in particular: firstly, the Persian Wars against Greece in 490 and 480/79, and secondly, the conquest of Persia in 330 by the Macedonian king Alexander the Great. The focus on the Persian defeats in the Greek sources which reported them led to the overwhelming impression of a weak empire in a perpetual state of decline. This view finds its origin in our earliest surviving Greek sources on Persian history, the *Histories* of Herodotus (lived c.484–425), and the tragedy *The Persians* written by Aeschylus (lived 525/4–456), first performed in 472. Both works created, in the aftermath of the Persian War of 480/79, the antithesis between Greeks and barbarians, the latter becoming a stereotyped reference to the Persians in the fifth and fourth centuries in Greek written and visual arts. Together, these sources shaped the idea of the antithesis between (Greek) freedom and (Persian) despotism, as well as between Europe and Asia. This theme found itself perpetuated in classical scholarship for about 200 years, educating generations of students of Classics and Ancient History to accept the 'traditional' view as given. In the nineteenth century, it led the German philosopher Georg W. Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831 CE) to declare in one of his lectures on the philosophy of history:

If we ask which [powers] were confronting each other in this war (= the Persian War), it is on the one hand the oriental despotism, the entire oriental world united under one master, thus, on the outside, with great advantage. (...) On the other hand against these sometimes very warlike peoples a few peoples of free individuals stand to fight. Never in world history has the superiority of spiritual power over a mass, and a not inconsiderable one at that, presented itself in such glory. (...) These are world-historical victories: they saved education and spiritual power, pulling them away from the Asiatic principle. (G.W.F. Hegel, 1961: 363; my translation)

Yet opportunities to challenge the stereotyped view of Persia arose in the early nineteenth century when Georg Friedrich Grotefend (1775–1853 CE), a student at the University of Göttingen in Germany, deciphered the cuneiform script, the wedge-shaped form of writing used in the Near East to write – mostly – on clay. This achievement was followed by another advance made in the mid-nineteenth century by the British officer

Henry Creswicke Rawlinson (1810–1895 CE), who copied the text of the Bisitun Inscription, a monumental trilingual inscription and relief carved high on Mt. Bisitun in northwest Iran by the Persian king Darius I in which he recorded the events that led to his accession to the Persian throne in 522. For the first time, scholars were able to learn about the ancient Persians from their own voice. Even more far-reaching, the decipherment of the cuneiform scripts opened an entire new gateway to our understanding of the ancient Near East and ancient Persia, as it enabled scholars to read the royal inscriptions and the thousands of cuneiform tablets from the archives of the ancient Near East written in Akkadian. The decipherment of the Bisitun Inscription led to the birth of a new discipline, Assyriology, while it also paved the way for ancient Persian studies. Subsequent archaeological excavations of Iranian sites such as Susa, Pasargadae, Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis from the late nineteenth century until 1979, brought to light more inscriptions, and enabled a new generation of scholars to study Persian history using primary sources.

Had it been, up to this point, down to many individual scholars across the world who ventured into the fields of Iranian archaeology, languages and history, it was a series of workshops on Achaemenid History organised by Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg of the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, and Amélie Kuhrt of University College London, England, which propelled Achaemenid Studies into an established research area. This was not least due to their endeavour to bring together scholars from different disciplines, Classics, Ancient History, Archaeology, Egyptology, Semitic Studies and Old Testament Studies, to name but a few, to find common ground and enable a diverse discussion on the Persian empire. At the same time in the early 1980s, the monumental endeavour of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* project based at Columbia University, USA, was initiated by Ehsan Yarshater, and has now become an invaluable research tool for Iranian studies, including the study of Achaemenid Persia.

In order to understand what Achaemenid history entails and to study it in a meaningful way, the interdisciplinary approach which began with the Achaemenid History Workshops is key, for we are dealing not only with a vast range of different languages and scripts, from Elamite, different dialects of Akkadian and Old Persian cuneiform scripts to Phoenician, Aramaic, Hebrew, Hieroglyphic, Demotic, Lycian and Greek, but also with a wide array of scholarly disciplines, including History, Archaeology, Old Testament Studies, Art History, Numismatics and Papyrology. For a single scholar, the mastery of all these languages and disciplines is hardly feasible, and thus the co-operation and collaboration with colleagues from other fields is essential. The Achaemenid History Workshops, which met annually between 1981 and 1990, began this innovative approach, which has since then been successfully adopted by other conferences and workshops on Achaemenid history and the history of pre-Islamic Iran. They were the inspiration for a website for Achaemenid research, www.achemenet.com, and the research journal ARTA, as well as new series publications on Persian history such as *Oriens et Occidens* and *Classica et Orientalia*.

It is easy to appreciate that the demands and challenges faced by scholars and students of Achaemenid history thus are far more complex than for most of these individual disciplines, whose research is contained to a restricted geographical space or a specific language. Since scholars have become open to incorporating material and approaches from other disciplines, many discoveries have been brought to light which have had a considerable impact on the way we view the Persian empire today. Some

critics continue to argue that, due to a lack of historiographical writing from Persia itself, we are still, ultimately, dependent on the Greek sources to write a history of the Achaemenid empire. Yet the inclusion of the richness of the Near Eastern and Egyptian sources which have come to light in the past decades, the archaeological excavations which have taken place in the periphery of the empire, and even the study of Achaemenid artefacts in their own right, have made significant contributions to illuminate the way this empire functioned and the king, his governors and the court expressed themselves within their realm. Not only have they enabled us to gain deeper insights into the structure and organisation of the empire and its provinces, into practical aspects of legal positions between the Persian authority and local communities, the way the economy functioned at imperial and local level, the recruitment and payment of troops and the relationship between the centre and local cults. In quite a few instances they also have shown that many of the views expressed in the classical sources are subject to literary constructs, while others are simply inaccurate, if not plain false. In other cases, such as in the publication of the Aramaic texts from the Jewish colony of Elephantine, of the Babylonian bankhouse of the Murashu family of Nippur, the Persepolis archives, the correspondence of Arsames, the Persian governor of Egypt, or, most recently, the correspondence of Akhmavazda, probably the Persian satrap of Bactria, we have been provided with unique insights into the daily life of local governors, high-ranking and ordinary people, estate owners and tax payers, administrators, officials, workers and servants in the royal cities of the Persian empire which are unparalleled anywhere else in the sixth to fourth centuries BCE.

FURTHER READING

For an overview of the Greek sources on Persia see Brosius, M. (2013). Greek sources on Achaemenid Iran. In: *Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran* (ed. D. Potts), 658–668. Oxford: Oxford University Press. The story of the decipherment of the cuneiform script is described in Wiesehöfer, J. (2001). *Ancient Persia: From 550 BC to 650 AD* (trans. A. Azodi), 231–242. London: Tauris. The conference volumes of the *Achaemenid History Workshops* were edited by Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg and different co-editors in eight volumes and were published between 1983 and 1994. Since then the Achaemenid History series continues to publish monographs and edited volumes on the subject. The *Encyclopaedia Iranica* is now an online tool and can be accessed at www.iranicaonline.org.

For the impact of the Persian Wars on world history see the seminal article by Wiesehöfer, J. (1993). “Denn es sind welthistorische Siege” – nineteenth and twentieth-century views of the Persian Wars. In: *The Construction of the Ancient Near East* (ed. A.C. Gunter), 61–83. Copenhagen: Academic Press (Culture and History 11).