

Persians: The Age of the Great Kings

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role from the beginning to the end of the Vietnam War—not to mention the war as a whole, the Navy, and our nation—this book is a tremendous contribution.

ALBION A. BERGSTROM



Persians: The Age of the Great Kings, by Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones. New York: Basic Books, 2022. 448 pages. \$35.

As one of two case leads for the Naval War College’s study of the Peloponnesian War, I was looking to expand the case from simply studying the thirty-year conflict between Athens and Sparta to examining broadly the 125-year competition among Athens, Sparta, and Persia. Thus I was excited to read Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones’s *Persians*, which seeks to tell the story of the rise and fall of the Persian, or Achaemenid, Empire using “genuine, indigenous, ancient Persian sources to tell a very different story from the one we might be familiar with, the one moulded around ancient Greek accounts” (p. 5). It illustrates how little I knew about the Persian Empire that the section in which I was most interested takes up less than 10 percent of Llewellyn-Jones’s history.

Llewellyn-Jones uses disparate sources—Persian, Greek, Hebrew, and Egyptian histories, as well as bureaucratic records, royal inscriptions, and even pictographs carved on cliff faces and palace walls—to trace the history of the Persian Empire from 600 to 330 BCE. He leaves the reader with three important takeaways. First, the unitary nature of the Achaemenid dynasty was both its strength and its weakness. While there never were rival dynasties with extensive resources to challenge the emperor’s rule

during his reign, each succession drew multiple claimants to the throne from within the same extended family, and the eventual winner of this contest was forced to spend a great deal of blood, treasure, and time both destroying any trace of his rivals and burnishing his credibility. Second, partly as a result of this (relatively) orderly succession, the Persian Empire either maintained its size or expanded—there was never any decline in size. Although Persia’s inability to conquer Greece in the Greco-Persian Wars of 490–479 BCE was a defeat, Llewellyn-Jones points out that Greece was never part of Persia proper, and—sadly for a Peloponnesian War case lead—Persia was a much less important factor in the Peloponnesian War saga than Egypt, the Middle East, or western India. Finally, despite the wealth and power of the Persian Empire, Alexander was able to dismantle it in just a few years, although his assumption of Darius III’s claim to be “the king of kings” leaves an implication that the empire lived on, albeit in Hellenistic guise.

Persians features a family tree of the Achaemenid dynasty, maps, numerous drawings, and two sections of full-color photos. The family tree and maps would have been improved with small editorial changes, such as adding dates for the various emperors’ reigns, and the addition of more and more-detailed maps to highlight the regions and cities discussed in the text. Despite these minor foibles, the book is a quick, engrossing read that covers a lot of ground.

It also is a strange amalgam of popular and scholarly history. Routinely, sources are acknowledged but not cited, save for epigraphical sources that are cited using a detailed shorthand. Nonacademic readers may not be concerned about

the particular tablet from which a figure derives, but scholarly readers may wonder why Llewellyn-Jones describes Diodorus Siculus—a historian long considered unreliable, and whom Llewellyn-Jones earlier dismisses as a prurient “Orientalist” (p. 191)—as “logical and wide-ranging” (p. 273). Perhaps slightly more-robust citations, as Donald Kagan provided in his history of the Peloponnesian War, would have solved some of these problems.

On the subject of sources, Llewellyn-Jones acknowledges the major issues. First, most of our existing knowledge of the Persian Empire comes from Greek and Latin histories or the Old Testament. As a result, there are both some real problems of bias—as Llewellyn-Jones nicely puts it, Greeks cared more about describing what Greeks *were not* than what Persians *were* (pp. 11–14)—and misconception verging on orientalism. Second, Persian sources are atypical in that “the Persians never wrote narrative history,” which forces any historian to rely on “songs, poetry, fables, and legends” (p. 20). Llewellyn-Jones’s introduction features an overview of the reliability of sources, and he offers his own commentary sporadically, at one point telling the reader that “there is no obvious reason not to [believe a source]” (p. 288).

While nonacademic readers may take Llewellyn-Jones at his word, I would have loved to see how he determined the reliability of his sources. For example, he scoffs at Herodotus’s description of Darius falling in love with a tree as a clear attempt by the Greek author to “other” the Persian emperor by making him a ridiculous foreigner (pp. 233–34), but he recounts page after page of harem-based intrigue (pp. 320–34) without much critical commentary. For his chapter on Alexander, however, Llewellyn-Jones delivers the goods with a short section

describing the major issues with the sources, the disagreements among authors, the missing pieces, the lack of historical Persian accounts, and—most importantly—his methodology for solving this problem (pp. 353–55). Llewellyn-Jones clearly knows more about this topic than most, but more of such insights into his methodology throughout would have been invaluable.

In the end, I did not learn much about Persian perspectives on the Greco-Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, but I doubt that was Llewellyn-Jones’s intent for the book. However, I did learn a lot about Persia, as well as the problems incumbent on attempting to decenter Greek authors from a history for which there are few traditional alternatives. As a result, *Persians* is great for readers looking for a non-Greek, although perhaps not unbiased, take on Persia. And, just as Kagan inspired a generation of writers to consider the Peloponnesian War in more detail, one hopes that Llewellyn-Jones’s work will prove to be the beginning rather than the end of this kind of scholarship.

JOSHUA HAMMOND



How to Think like an Officer: Lessons in Learning and Leadership for Soldiers and Other Citizens, by Reed Bonadonna. Guilford, CT: Stackpole Books, 2020. 221 pages. \$29.95.

Reed Bonadonna begins his book sounding like a teacher driven by a mission but badly constrained by time. He explains, or perhaps bemoans, how little time he had, as a professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA), to get his midshipman students to “think like officers” (p. ix). This book is ostensibly an attempt to get the reader