

# Reviews

**Ctesias' *Persica* and Its Near Eastern Context**, Matt Waters, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017, ISBN 978-0-299-31094-3 (pbk), 978-0-299-31090-5 (hbk), -159 pp.

The *Persika*, composed by the Greek doctor Ctesias of Cnidus in the early fourth century BCE, occupies a complex position in the hierarchy of Greek literature on ancient Persia. Surviving only in literary fragments from the Roman era and a Byzantine epitome, maligned by other Greek authors and demonstrably inaccurate on events such as Darius the Great's succession and the Greco-Persian Wars, Ctesias long provoked scholarly caution if not outright disdain. Participants in the influential Achaemenid History Workshops of the 1980s stressed his culpability in the most extreme Greco-Roman stereotypes of Persian royal decadence. Yet he is not without historical value for the events of his own lifetime, as demonstrated by correlations between the *Persika* and Babylonian business documents bearing on the succession crisis of 424. A wave of twenty-first-century scholarship, exemplified in the scholarly editions and commentaries by Dominique Lenfant and Jan Stronk, has forged new paths in Ctesias scholarship by studying the *Persika* as a literary work rather than a piece of classical historiography in the vein of Herodotus or Thucydides. Matt Waters' concise study builds on these recent approaches, doubting that Ctesias consulted official records during his time at the Achaemenid court, and arguing instead that he collected oral traditions and reframed them in a new genre of quasi-historical romance.

Waters breaks new ground in his search for Ctesias' thematic antecedents. Rather than focusing on the *Persika's* connections with Iranian oral tradition, best attested in later collections such as the *Shahnameh*, Waters delves into the ancient Mesopotamian cultural milieu and traces Ctesias' extensive debts to the literature of Assyria and Babylonia. He identifies Mesopotamian roots throughout the entire span of Ctesias' work, including its six initial books of "*Assyriaka*," novel compositions loosely set in imagined versions of the Neo-Assyrian empire and Median kingdom, as well as the remaining books on the Teispid and Achaemenid monarchs of Persia. Rather than attempting a full commentary, Waters explores Ctesias' employment of Mesopotamian material by devoting four chapters to particular thematic strands, from tales of powerful eunuchs and warrior queens to legends of the empire-founder Cyrus the Great and the gender-bending adventures of noble heroes.

The first chapter engages with Ctesias' presentation of eunuchs, key figures in later Orientalist court stereotypes. Waters argues that their narrative ubiquity originated in Ctesias, as these officials appear throughout the fragments and epitome of the *Persika* in far greater frequency and prominence than they do in Herodotus' *Histories* or the writings of Xenophon. He expertly surveys the Assyriological scholarship on eunuchs as court functionaries, and emphasizes the difficulties inherent in determining the difference between literal castrati and high officials bearing a court title rooted in loyalty to the monarch rather than bodily status. Ctesias appears to have considered the physical aspects of the eunuch less important than the narrative value of a secretive courtier figure, which could serve as a dramatic vehicle for a range of plot devices. After assembling a comprehensive register of Ctesias' attested eunuch references (pp. 29–32), Waters divides them into separate thematic categories (pp. 32–35), with stories of intrigue and treachery on the one hand, and exceptional loyalty on the other (although several individuals appear in both genres). Waters views the image of the scheming courtier as an inheritance from Neo-Assyrian characterizations of enemy rulers' servants who turned their masters to evil deeds. A final type of eunuch story involves an overseer of transitions from life to death who stands guard over the remains of deceased monarchs' bodies and tombs; Waters draws a persuasive connection between these episodes and attested Achaemenid practice, in the activities of chamberlains associated with funerary cult for Cambyses and members of the royal family in the Persepolis Fortification Archive.

The second chapter turns to Semiramis, the semi-legendary Assyrian queen whose hyper-sexualized and bellicose character inverted Greek expectations of female behavior. Waters credits Ctesias with her prominence in subsequent Greco-Roman literature. After summarizing the limited evidence for her historical model, the ninth-century Neo-Assyrian queen mother Shammu-ramat who campaigned at least once in company with her royal son, he demonstrates that the literary character of Semiramis draws on multiple strands of Mesopotamian royal tradition. These include the concept of *melammu*, a divine aura that overawes those in its royal possessor's presence, and the ideological trope of the builder-monarch, constructing palaces, temples, and infrastructure, and reshaping the physical landscape of the realm. Most importantly, Waters sees Ctesias' Semiramis as a hybrid personification of

two key figures in early Mesopotamian literature—the goddess Ishtar, with whom she shared a (posthumous) divinity and voracious consumption of mortal lovers, and the Old Akkadian ruler Sargon, a child similarly abandoned to nature at birth but miraculously rescued and set on a path to universal conquest. In the end, Ctesias' Semiramis is depicted as a world conqueror whose expansion ended in defeat on the Indus frontier, a story with some resemblance to the Herodotean tradition on Cyrus' death, which Waters presents as a possible intrusion of the Greek hubris concept into a narrative otherwise dependent on Mesopotamian roots.

Chapter 3 turns to the Ctesian Cyrus tradition and its rich divergences from the storyline presented in Herodotus (who famously notes his awareness of alternate versions of the empire-founder's upbringing). The Greeks were unaware of the Elamite milieu alluded to in the Cyrus Cylinder's reference to the conqueror as "king of Anshan," and while Herodotus correctly names Cyrus' father as Cambyses, both authors set his rise in the context of an imagined Median court rather than recognizing the existence of a dynastic Persian monarchy in the early sixth century. Waters traces the connections between Mesopotamian omen literature and the prophetic dreams that appear in the Greek Cyrus narratives (notably, both Ctesias and Herodotus recount dreams involving female urination as a metaphor for world conquest). But he stresses the thematic difference of Ctesias' Cyrus in his humble origins—rather than the lost prince who recovers his true identity, he exemplifies a rags-to-riches tale as the son of a bandit exploiting court patronage to rise to royal favor. Waters once again sees Mesopotamian storylines at work in the tales of Cyrus' right-hand man Oibaras, who helps him rise to power and crowns him king but later comes to grief after killing the former ruler Astyages; the theme of the hero's helper recalls such partnerships as that between Enkidu and Gilgamesh. The discussion here misses an opportunity for further attention to a homonymous Herodotean figure, the clever groom whose equine stratagem wins Darius recognition as king (Hdt. 3.85–7), in another story with Assyrian literary echoes. It is also worth posing the question of a historical model for one or both Oibaras figures, perhaps in the "Gutian" leader Ugbaru who first occupies Babylon on Cyrus' behalf in the Babylonian Nabonidus Chronicle.

Waters' final chapter explores Ctesias' recurring stories of social and gender inversion. He identifies numerous examples, starting with the fictional Assyrian kings Ninyas and Sardanapalus, whose over-sexed and feminized depictions in Ctesias may originate in distortions of the Assyrian royal cult of Ishtar and even the devotion of Artaxerxes II to the Iranian goddess Anahita. Waters carefully surveys the echoes of Assyria's actual seventh-century troubles and downfall in the tale of Sardanapalus' overthrow by the Median hero Arbakes, whose contempt for the monarch's femininity was encouraged by the prophecies of the Babylonian seer Belesys. (Regarding this episode, Waters could have said more on the lasting memory of the actual Babylonian–Median alliance that brought down the Assyrian empire, and Ctesias' reuse of the names of prominent figures of his own day, the Syrian and Median satraps Belesys [Bab. Belshunu] and Arbakes, who served Artaxerxes II at the time of Cyrus' rebellion, in place of the historical Cyaxares of Media and Nabopolassar of

Babylon.) He next examines the romances of Parsondes, a masculine hero imprisoned in female dress and forced to work as a singing girl before achieving revenge on the man who brought him low, and Stryngaios, a warrior driven to unmanly grief and suicide by his untempered passion for the warlike Scythian queen Zarinaia; the inversion theme again unites a range of material that seems unique to Ctesias while drawing on elements of Mesopotamian religious and social traditions. The survey closes with the “historical saga” of the fifth-century Persian aristocrat Megabyzus, abused by his unfaithful Achaemenid wife and driven to rebellion by his king’s dishonorable actions, who eventually returned from exile disguised as a leper—thereby displaying dramatic reversals of fortune and social station rather than gender per se.

In a brief conclusion, Waters summarizes his view of Ctesias as a storyteller who engaged in the “Hellenized rendering of Mesopotamian and Iranian traditions, coupled with his own artful ingenuity,” an “appropriation” facilitated by immersion in the multicultural Achaemenid court atmosphere (p. 103). This compelling assessment sheds new light on the underappreciated importance of the Ctesian legacy. Removed from scrutiny in terms of the accuracy of its political and military narrative, the *Persika* can serve as a rich source for the late Achaemenid era as a period of intellectual transmission between the societies of ancient western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean, prefiguring the literary and cultural interactions of the Hellenistic world.

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**Persian Interventions: The Achaemenid Empire, Athens and Sparta, 450-386 BCE**, John O. Hyland, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017, ISBN 9781421423708 (hbk), pp. xii + 257.

In 479 BCE Xerxes lost his European territories and much of coastal Anatolia. Just under a century later Artaxerxes II recovered Anatolia. This book is a new reading of Persian imperial engagement with the Aegean frontier in the intervening period. The enterprise is colored by new or reevaluated non-Greek evidence. But the *histoire événementielle* comes almost entirely from Greek sources—Thucydides, Xenophon, Diodorus and Plutarch plus (occasionally) non-literary epigraphic and numismatic documents (e.g. the SUN coinage is linked to Cyrus’ support of Lysander, Sidon group IV coins to the 396 fleet deployment)—and for the most part the story-line with which Hyland works is not markedly different from that familiar to *aficionados* of the period. What is new is the interpretation put upon the story.