

2008

Remembering the Persian Empire (Book Review)

Elizabeth P. Baughan

University of Richmond, ebaughan@richmond.edu

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Recommended Citation

Baughan, Elizabeth P. "Remembering the Persian Empire (Book Review)." Reviews of *Forgotten Empire. The World of Ancient Persia; The Persian Empire. A History; Birth of the Persian Empire. Ancient West & East* 7 (2008): 345-353.

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REMEMBERING THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

- J. Curtis and N. Tallis (eds.), *Forgotten Empire. The World of Ancient Persia*, The British Museum Press, London 2005, published in America by The University of California Press, Berkeley, 272 pp., 32 black-and-white and 543 colour illustrations. Paperback. ISBN 10: 0-7141-1157-0/13: 978-0-7141-1157-5 (British Museum). ISBN 10: 0-520-24731-0 (University of California)
- L. Allen, *The Persian Empire. A History*, The British Museum Press, London 2005, 208 pp., 50 black-and-white and 100 colour illustrations. Cased. ISBN 0-7141-1154-6
- V.S. Curtis and S. Stewart (eds.), *Birth of the Persian Empire*, The Idea of Iran 1, I.B. Tauris in association with The London Middle East Institute at SOAS and The British Museum, London/New York 2005, vi+147 pp., 19 black-and-white illustrations. Cased. ISBN 1-84511-062-5

Has the world forgotten the Persian empire? Three new publications approach this question from different angles. Despite what their titles imply, the British Museum's landmark 2005 exhibition, 'Forgotten Empire. The World of Ancient Persia', and catalogue of the same name have aimed to reclaim the Persian empire not from oblivion but rather from its reputation, founded upon Hellenocentric and Eurocentric biases, as a 'nest of despotism and tyranny', and to illuminate its 'true character' as a remarkably tolerant and cohesive imperial power that embraced cultural variation (pp. 6, 8). One could say that the Persian empire has not until now been forgotten, but remembered and recast in different ways over the centuries. That is, in fact, a central point of L. Allen's new survey of Achaemenid history, *The Persian Empire. A History*, which also explores the self-conscious 'remembering' of earlier Near Eastern dynasties by the Achaemenid kings themselves. The papers collected in *Birth of the Persian Empire* demonstrate in their own way how ideas about the Achaemenid past are shaped and reshaped by modern concepts of culture and national identity.

Forgotten Empire's reassessment of the legacy of ancient Persia is timely, as is the international collaboration of museums and scholars that lie behind it. The exhibition brought together, for the first time ever, key pieces of Achaemenid art from the British Museum, the Louvre, the National Museum of Iran and the Persepolis Museum. Contributions to the catalogue (henceforth *FE*) come from leading scholars in Britain, France, Iran and the United States. Following four introductory chapters on history, language and archaeology, eight chapters on different aspects of Achaemenid culture provide background and context for the 473 catalogue entries, which are grouped thematically in intervening sections. Technical reports and short summaries of specific topics such as satrapal coinage punctuate the catalogue portions. This organisation recreates a physical journey through the exhibition, with introductory articles at the entrance to each new 'room' and occasional explanatory panels among the objects. The abundance of illustrations and their generally high quality (the majority of them in colour) heighten the immediacy of the objects for the reader by capturing the glow of luxurious materials, the sheen of polished architectural surfaces, and

the sharp textures of cuneiform texts.¹ Even a reader who (like this reviewer) has not attended the exhibition can feel the excitement of 'turning the corner' from the Cyrus Cylinder to find architectural fragments from Persepolis, then glazed bricks from Susa, then gold jewellery from the Oxus Treasure, a glass rhyton from Persepolis, and so on. This exhibition and its catalogue have assembled a truly unprecedented, all-star cast of Achaemenid monuments and artefacts. It is therefore disappointing that the accompanying texts (both the chapters and the catalogue entries) do not work together to create a coherent account of Achaemenid history and culture.

Inconsistencies in the level of analysis and in the integration of text with the catalogue are the biggest problems of the book. The first three chapters are solid and promising: P. Briant provides a concise historical survey that stresses the strength of the empire even in its decline and places the end of Achaemenid rule not with the defeat of Darius but the death of Alexander; I.L. Finkel provides a fascinating narrative of the history and process of the decipherment of 'Old Persian' cuneiform inscriptions; and M.W. Stolper outlines the diverse languages of Achaemenid texts and inscriptions and explains their Near Eastern origins and ideological implications. From Stolper's survey emerges the key theme of cultural variation – a potential unifying thread for the catalogue as a whole. This thread is lost, however, in the following two chapters on archaeology and palatial architecture, the first by J. Curtis, the latter by J. Curtis and S. Razmjou. Curtis synthesises Achaemenid-era archaeological evidence in the Persian 'heartland' as well as the greater empire, with separate sections for regions such as Syria, Anatolia and Egypt (the last contributed by N. Spencer). The survey is primarily descriptive, like a gazetteer listing finds of the Persian period, with little analysis of origins or context. In some cases Curtis acknowledges that Achaemenid-style objects from the far reaches of the empire may owe as much to local as to Persian traditions, but others he describes simply as 'Persian'; or, as with the Pazyryk burials, he notes Achaemenid 'influence' or 'connections' (p. 48), without explanation. This is precisely the kind of survey that M. Root, 15 years ago, enjoined scholars of Achaemenid archaeology to abandon in favour of critical analyses of cultural significance.² It is partly justified by the discussion of architectural traditions in the following chapter, but the reader is not alerted to the overlap, and that chapter has its own weaknesses. Curtis and Razmjou present 'The Palace' in archetypal terms, describing its wall construction and roofing techniques generally, without reference to the specific evidence which allows us to make these reconstructions, and with few references to the associated catalogue entries or relevant plans in the previous chapter. Assyrian, Egyptian and Ionian elements in Achaemenid architecture and palatial decoration are noted, but their significance for Achaemenid ideology is not discussed. Greek influence is severely downplayed here and in the accompanying catalogue entries, where bead-and-reel and egg-and-dart decoration on a pivot-stone from Persepolis is described simply as 'floral design in low relief' (p. 98).

The remaining seven chapters also range widely in interpretative approach and level of integration with the catalogue. St J. Simpson offers a useful synthesis of archaeological and

textual evidence for banqueting in the Achaemenid world, but more emphasis could be placed on important observations about centres of production for typically 'Achaemenid' wares outside the Persian heartland. Provenance is an issue here and in the following chapter on jewellery, by J. Curtis. Most of the pieces in these sections of the catalogue are 'said to be from' particular places in the Persian empire, and many are from the Oxus Treasure. It is regrettable that the complex issues surrounding the history and interpretation of the Oxus Treasure are not discussed here, or anywhere in this book, especially given the detailed attention paid to some of the Oxus Treasure material in technical reports by B. Armbruster, within the catalogue entries. Even when questions of authenticity are acknowledged, as for the silver phiale inscribed with the name of Artaxerxes I (cat. 103), a full-page photograph may lend its own aura of legitimacy. Simpson aims to counteract the provenance problem by grounding his discussion of the catalogued pieces within the larger context of Achaemenid-era drinking vessels not included in the exhibition (though many of them are also unprovenanced). N. Tallis, too, in his survey of 'Transport and Warfare', considers a wide range of textual and representational evidence; some of his most interesting points concern items outside the exhibition. Catalogue and text are most closely linked in A.R. Meadows's chapter on administration and communication. He begins by comparing the Persian and Athenian empires, with respect to their inclusion and tolerance of subject peoples' religious, linguistic and cultural differences. The accompanying catalogue entries present seals and sealings, weights, cuneiform and Aramaic documents (including some of the Persepolis Fortification tablets), and coins, most of which are integral to Meadows's discussion. Additional summaries of different aspects of Achaemenid coinage within the catalogue complement Meadows's chapter with more detailed, and in some cases alternative perspectives (as with the 'satrapal' coinage in Asia Minor). A. Villing extends Meadows's comparison of Persian and Athenian imperialism and synthesises evidence for the presence of Greeks and Greek objects in Persia, representations of Persians and the idea of Persia in Greek art and literature, and emulation of Achaemenid styles in Greek ceramics and clothing. Here again, as in Tallis's piece, the accompanying catalogue entries (including the so-called 'Penelope' from Persepolis) comprise only a small part of the evidence discussed. S. Razmjou makes a commendable effort to incorporate material from the catalogue as a whole into his survey of 'Religion and Burial Customs', but at the same time overlooks some relevant pieces in this section of the catalogue (such as a cylinder seal showing a 'Babylonian priest' and symbols of Marduk next to a 'Persian Royal Hero,' cat. 208). His summary of Achaemenid religion is clear but perhaps too tidy, glossing over controversies in the scholarship on Zoroastrianism and Mithraism, and his discussion of burial traditions is also somewhat problematic. Though he finds little evidence for proper Zoroastrian ossuaries, he interprets burials in rock-cut tombs or sarcophagi as Zoroastrian strategies to avoid contaminating the earth with corpses; at the same time, he uses Xenophon's anecdotal report of Cyrus the Great's burial wishes as evidence for an alternate form of royal Achaemenid burial, even though they seem to contradict these beliefs and were not apparently followed in the actual Tomb of Cyrus. The final chapter, fittingly, details the 'Legacy' of the empire – V.S. Curtis outlines the use of Achaemenid iconography and references to the Achaemenid past in later Persian, Parthian, Sasanian and European sources, the history of tourism at Persepolis, and the Shah's 1971 celebration of 2500 years of Persian monarchy. While the chapter brings together a wide range of sources and information, it lacks interpretive discussion of how the idea of the Achaemenid past transformed over time. The accompanying

¹ Only one image of low resolution stands out from the rest (fig. 34, a detail of the tomb painting from Karaburun in Lycia).

² M.C. Root, 'From the Heart: Powerful Persianisms in the Art of the Western Empire'. In H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and A. Kurht (eds.), *Achaemenid History VI. Asia Minor and Egypt: Old Cultures in a New Empire* (Leiden 1991), 1-30.

catalogue entries include Sasanian coins, illustrations made by early travellers, and Iranian currency commemorating the 1971 celebration, but few of these are referenced in the chapter, even when they are directly mentioned.

More aggressive referencing of catalogued items overall would make *FE* more useful and coherent. The catalogue entries, moreover, are not consistent in depth and detail. We are told in the Editors' Foreword that these entries, composed by the editorial staff from a range of sources, present 'some of the latest thinking on much-debated issues' in the field of Achaemenid studies (p. 3), but most of the entries are descriptive rather than analytical and few contain more than one bibliographical reference. Some texts are translated, others are not. Some entries offer interesting ideas not found in the accompanying chapters that could easily be missed (like the suggestion that the coins from the foundation deposit of the Persepolis Apadana reflect the 'boundaries of the empire': p. 58). Others leave obvious anomalies or peculiarities unexplained. For instance, on cat. 35, a relief fragment from Persepolis showing a bearded man leading a camel, the hair and beard appear to be unfinished and traces of claw chiselling are readily apparent, but these features are not mentioned in the catalogue entry.

Though *FE* assembles a vast amount of evidence for Achaemenid history and culture and its lavish illustrations are sure to make it a favourite image source-book for teachers and scholars, its usefulness for research, whether beginning or advanced, is hindered by the lack of an index and selective referencing of sources. Footnotes vary in length from chapter to chapter but are usually economical, limited to one recent source. As a result, some crucial earlier sources are left out of the bibliography altogether.³ On the other hand, older sources are sometimes referenced even when more recent scholarship, relevant to a point made in this book, exists.⁴ The presence or absence of footnotes in some chapters, moreover, seems not to depend on the type of information or idea presented. Reference features in the back matter, including a timeline of Achaemenid kings, glossary and concordance of British Museum inventory numbers, are helpful, but the glossary could be more consistent – *daric* appears but not *siglos*, *akinakes* but not *kidaris* or *kandys*. Definitions of 'Persian' and 'Median' dress would also be appropriate here, if not in a separate section within the catalogue. These designations appear throughout the book but are discussed only briefly in Tallis's chapter (p. 216), and the terminology is not consistent – the soft cap of the 'Median' riding costume is called a *kidaris* in cats. 318–326, a 'Persian headdress' in cats. 376–377, and a 'turban' on p. 152. Incongruities like these are predictable in a volume with multiple authors and editors, but nevertheless avoidable.

Beyond minor technical problems, like a missing footnote in Chapter 12 ('Legacy') and a few typographical errors (including the inconsistent spelling of two contributors' names), *FE* also contains some errors in content. The entry for cat. 277, the silver phiale from the

³ For example C. Nylander, *Ionians in Pasargadae. Studies in Old Persian Architecture* (Uppsala 1970).

⁴ As is the case with Tallis's reference to M.A. Littauer and J.H. Crouwel, *Wheeled Vehicles and Ridden Animals in the Ancient Near East* (Leiden 1979) for the so-called 'Graeco-Persian' reliefs from Daskyleion as evidence for chariots adapted to convey coffins. M. Nollé, *Denkmäler vom Satrapenstiz Daskyleion. Studien zur graeco-persischen Kunst* (Berlin 1992), 88–92, has interpreted the wheeled vehicles in these representations as covered carriages, or *harmamaxae*, which Tallis himself (p. 212) discusses as a means of travel for the Persian court.

sarcophagus excavated on the Acropolis of Susa, claims that decoration is 'visible only from the underside' of the bowl, but the interior view clearly shows a lotus bud-and-flower chain encircling the raised omphalos (p. 178).⁵ As W. Messerschmidt points out in his *BMCR* review of the book, additional errors occur in J. Curtis's description of the Persepolis Apadana reliefs and the sarcophagi from Sidon.⁶ The 'Satrap Sarcophagus' from Sidon is further misrepresented in S. Razmjou's chapter, where it is included in a paragraph detailing evidence from 'western Asia Minor' as 'another example of Persian nobility buried in a sarcophagus' (p. 152) – this not only misrepresents the location of Sidon, it also overlooks the monument's Phoenician and Greek elements.⁷

The interpretative angle that is lacking in some of the contributions to *FE* is one of the strengths of Allen's *Persian Empire* (henceforth *PE*), published by the British Museum concurrently with the exhibition. A. discusses many of the items included in *FE*, but in a very different way. A comparison of A.'s caption for fig. 2.15 with the entry for *FE* cat. 72, a cylinder seal from Iraq, is particularly telling. While *FE* gives a purely descriptive account of the seal's paired human-animal combats and notes its Greek stylistic affinities, A.'s caption identifies one of the human figures as 'Babylonian' and the other as 'Persian' and suggests a pointed juxtaposition of the Babylonian and Persian royal hero – the former fighting a bull, the latter fighting a lion and 'perhaps overpowering the higher status opponent' (p. 53). She also places the image in the wider context of Mesopotamian dynastic art and symbolism, as an expression of royal power over chaos. Despite the suggestive caption, however, the seal is not discussed or even referenced in the accompanying text, though it serves to illustrate a point made on the very same page: 'The symbolic struggle against human evil or natural chaos in the maintenance of civilisation was a core ideal of Near Eastern kingship' (p. 53). The case of this cylinder seal thus demonstrates both a benefit and weakness of A.'s book.

The main strengths of *PE* are its lavish illustrations, its accessible written style and its interpretive approach. It is a colourful and thoughtful introduction to Achaemenid history, illustrated to win the hearts of beginning scholars, who may find Briant's comprehensive volume too daunting,⁸ or those in other fields, such as classics. But a lack of integration of these illustrations with the textual narrative presents a major difficulty. Some important issues or ideas are alluded to only in image captions, not in the relevant portion of the chapter text; or no reference to the image is made when the issue is discussed in the chapter (as with the cylinder seal mentioned above). It thus seems that many of the illustrations were added after the text was complete (and the uncommonly neat totals, 50 black-and-white and 100 colour images, may also speak to this).⁹ As a result, there are two ways to read this

⁵ This appears to result from a misreading of the entry for the same bowl in P.O. Harper, J. Aruz and F. Tallon (eds.), *The Royal City of Susa. Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre* (New York 1992), 244, no. 170, where it is suggested that the bowl's heavy weight and the fact that 'the relief decoration of the exterior is not visible on the interior' may indicate that the piece was cast.

⁶ W. Messerschmidt, 'Review of *Forgotten Empire. The World of Ancient Persia*'. *BMCR* 2006.05.21.

⁷ I. Kleemann, *Die Satrapen-Sarkophag aus Sidon* (Berlin 1958).

⁸ P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander. A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, IN 2002).

⁹ Further evidence for the lack of integration of text and illustrations are inconsistencies in terminology – for example the name for an area of Hamadan/Ecbatana is translated ('Hegmataneh hills') in the caption for fig. 3.4 but transliterated ('Tappeh-ye Hekmataneh') in the chapter text and in the caption for fig. 3.5.

book: by following the text from beginning to end or by browsing the images and their captions, which present a narrative of their own. This reviewer found it difficult to decide how to proceed upon turning each new page – whether to continue the sequential text or ‘read’ the images, for fear the continuous text would not signal a moment to do so.

PE consists of seven chapters, a brief introduction, notes, bibliography, index and a timeline of Achaemenid kings. The Introduction defines the terminology of Achaemenid studies and raises some of the methodological problems inherent to the field, like the use of texts (both Greek and Near Eastern) that operated within ideological constructs. But recognition of such constructs is not the endpoint of A.’s investigation – she attempts to understand and explain them when possible, and this shapes her discussion throughout the book. For example, rather than discounting the ‘creative, novelistic, even romantic tone’ of Xenophon, Ctesias and other classical authors who describe the Persian royal court, she notes a similar tone in Hebrew and Avestan sources and wonders whether it ‘represents truthfully the imaginative perspectives and preoccupations of the multi-ethnic society encircling the court and administration of the empire’ (p. 11). Observations like these, though speculative, enrich the historical survey.

The main chapters, despite thematic titles, are arranged chronologically and so achieve an historical narrative while shifting thematic focus over time. In Chapter 1, ‘The Roots of Persian Rule’, A. stresses Assyrian and Median precedents for Achaemenid imperial administration and palatial building and the Near Eastern background for Achaemenid ideology, themes that are implied but not fully explored in *FE*. In her discussion of the rise of Cyrus the Great, she balances Greek historical memory of Median expansion with Near Eastern evidence. Chapter 2 (‘Conquest and Politics’) narrates the reigns of Darius I and Xerxes I, based on Herodotus, Persian royal inscriptions and Babylonian documents. The following chapter, ‘Royal Capitals’, provides an archaeological and literary tour of Ecbatana, Susa, Persepolis, Babylon and Pasargadae (which had already been described in some detail in Chapter 1). With its analytical bent, this general survey proves to be more effective than the chapters on archaeology and palaces in *FE*. Chapter 4, ‘The Rivals: Regional Rulers and Reflections of Power’, widens the scope of the historical survey to include outlying satrapies (though the focus remains on the Persian court and nobility) and continues the narrative thread of court succession through Darius III. The title of the next chapter, ‘Peoples, Communication, and Religion’, gives the impression that it will fill in this wider picture of the empire with information about the peoples that comprised it, and that is partly achieved by A.’s discussion of Achaemenid administrative and communication networks, but much of the evidence considered is still largely royal or elite. This is also true in the final section of the chapter, on religion, which is oddly placed and could stand on its own. Two more chapters chronicle the end and afterlife of the Persian empire. ‘Alexander and the End of Empire’ presents a sweeping, romantic narrative in keeping with the leading full-page image (Albrecht Altdorfer’s 1529 painting of the Battle of Issus) and others that grace the chapter (including beautiful illustrations from mediaeval manuscripts of Nizami’s *Iskandernama*). The final chapter, ‘Legends, Language, and Archaeological Discovery’, covers much of the same ground as the chapters by I. Finkel and V.S. Curtis in *FE*. This reviewer found Finkel’s account of the linguistic discoveries clearer than the brief survey provided here, but A.’s discussion of the transformation and evolution of thought about Achaemenid sites and history achieves precisely what is lacking in Curtis’s ‘Legacy’ chapter. A. draws interesting parallels between the Achaemenid use of earlier Mesopotamian royal iconography and palatial styles

and the reuse of Achaemenid monuments and motifs in post-Achaemenid Iran: the ‘ruin [of Persepolis] became a stage for rulers to proclaim their powers, while conscientiously meditating on the mortality of their predecessors’ (p. 165). And while Curtis describes the Shah’s 1971 celebration of Persian monarchy rather matter-of-factly, A. reflects on the events of the festival as ‘gestures of doomed extravagance’ (p. 183). A. also ventures, unlike Curtis, to take her survey of Achaemenid legacy beyond 1979, quoting Ayatollah Khamenei and addressing (if somewhat elliptically) the current archaeological climate in Iran.

PE contains several minor and two major typographical errors, the latter involving numerical dates with the first digit transposed by a century: 429 instead of 329 for Alexander’s first visit to Pasargadae (p. 85); and 274/3 instead of 374/3 for Artaxerxes II’s campaign, against Nectanebo I (p. 105). It is also worth noting that the volcanic material that covered Pompeii was not lava (fig. 6.4) but ash and stone, and that we should not necessarily expect to find the remains of Persian casualties at Marathon (fig. 2.12: ‘the large numbers of Persians said to have fallen by Herodotus are phantoms, yet to be located in the archaeological record’). Most of the photographs are very high quality, though a few are dark (for example fig. 2.10) and one has poor resolution (fig. 2.14). Seven colour maps locate important sites mentioned in the text.¹⁰

A final problem with A.’s book is its varying level of accessibility. While much of the writing is introductory, other aspects of presentation speak to an advanced readership, already familiar with Achaemenid history and geography. For instance, when Persepolis is introduced in Chapter 2, it is done obliquely, without naming the site: ‘On the fringe of the Marv Dasht plain, a raised stone hall and large columned audience hall were planned and raised...’ (p. 43). Persepolis is named in the caption for fig. 2.7 on the following page, but nowhere else in the chapter (and the figure itself is not signalled in the text). Acquaintance with sources like Herodotus is also sometimes assumed – oblique references to particular episodes are used to make a point, but since the details of the episode are not given, the reader unfamiliar with Herodotus may not follow the logic. While some of the footnotes are friendly to beginning scholars (noting, for instance, when a cited source is in a foreign language), citations are not always specific (as for the newly discovered fragments of Simonides’ *Persian War*, mentioned on p. 187, n. 43, but with no source given)¹¹ or comprehensive (for example, a footnote on the date of the Persian conquest of Sardis [p. 186, n. 36] refers only to the Babylonian chronicle, not to other written sources or to archaeological evidence from Sardis itself).¹² On the other hand, some of the lengthier footnotes contain important ideas, such as the suggestion that the seasonal mobility of the Persian court may be seen as a means of ‘reinforcing power’ (p. 188, n. 3). The bibliography is stronger in some areas than others, with notable absences including the recent *Ars Orientalis* volume on Medes and Persians.¹³

¹⁰ Most have helpful captions, but two do not: the initial map on pp. 12–13 and the one facing p. 51, though it appears from the gap in figures numbers in this chapter that one had been planned for the latter.

¹¹ This is cited properly by A. de Jong in *Birth*, 86, n. 14

¹² See, most recently, N. Cahill and J.H. Kroll, ‘New Archaic Coin Finds at Sardis’. *AJA* 109 (2005), 605–08.

¹³ M.C. Root (ed.), *Medes and Persians. Reflections on Elusive Empires* (Washington, DC 2002). Other relevant recent works that would strengthen the bibliography and Allen’s discussion include

Birth of the Persian Empire (hereafter *Birth*) contains six papers delivered in 2004 at the London Middle East Institute of the School of Oriental and African Studies in a series of lectures called 'The Idea of Iran: from Eurasian Steppe to Persian Empire'. An introductory chapter by the editors, V.S. Curtis and S. Stewart, summarises the papers and how they fit into past and current scholarship, as well as the aims of the new publication series, *The Idea of Iran*, of which this is the inaugural volume. The series title, after G. Gnoli's 1989 collection of essays by the same name, allows future volumes to cover a broad chronological and cultural range of topics pertaining to the national identity of Iran, and several of the papers presented here respond directly to Gnoli's ideas. This collection demonstrates how Iran's national identity has been shaped by, and has shaped, Achaemenid studies and modern ideas about ancient Persia; but at the same time, the new series aims to carry the field of Iranian studies beyond 'contemporary geopolitical boundaries' and to disengage them 'from contemporary pressures to reinterpret the past in ways that conform to present norms' (p. 1). The papers in *Birth* also illuminate many of the controversial issues that are smoothed over or only alluded to in *FE* and *PE*; many of them challenge traditional scholarship on Achaemenid history, culture and religion.

Fittingly, the lead paper reassesses key pieces of evidence for the cultural heritage and ancestry of the early kings of the Persian empire and challenges the traditional terminology and chronology of its 'birth': D.T. Potts argues that the Anshanite state ruled by Cyrus was culturally Elamite, not Persian, and that the Achaemenid Persian empire did not actually begin until the accession of Darius, descendant of Achaemenes. Potts situates Elam and Elamite culture in time and place and aims to elucidate the Elamite contribution to Achaemenid culture. In the final paper of the book, J. Curtis approaches the same goal from an archaeological perspective, with a wider view that encompasses Assyria and Media as well as Elam. He incorporates new readings of evidence, including his own rethinking of the ritual destruction and chronology of Tepe Nush-i Jan. Media also figures prominently in the paper by A. de Jong, who questions the common assumption that *magi* were Medians and argues that the Achaemenid kings were not Zoroastrians, as often stated. He finds the main contributions of the *magi* to Achaemenid culture in the realm of theology, especially concepts of time and its divisions. P.O. Skjærvø, on the other hand, compares Achaemenid royal inscriptions and documentary texts involving gods and priests with Avestan literature and finds striking parallels, especially in the role and imagery of the king and the sacrificer, that make it 'hard to conclude that [Zoroastrianism] was *not* the religion of the Achaemenid kings, at least from Darius onwards' (p. 53). He maintains that the *Avesta* reached the Iranian plateau in the 9th or 8th century BC, with the migration of Iranian peoples, and that Avestan ideas provided the theological basis for Darius' rise to power. F. Grenet, meanwhile, argues that the *Avesta* reflects a time *before* Media and Iran were part of the Zoroastrian landscape, since these regions are not represented among the places listed in the *Vidēvād*. He tries to match place descriptions in the *Vidēvād* with known locations

D. Stronach, 'Of Cyrus, Darius, and Alexander: A New Look at the 'Epitaphs' of Cyrus the Great'. In R. Dittmann *et al.* (eds.), *Variatio Delectat: Iran und der Westen. Gedenkschrift für Peter Calmeyer* (Münster 2000), 681-702, and E.R.M. Dusing, 'King or God? Imperial iconography and the "Tiarate head" coins of Achaemenid Anatolia'. *AASOR* 57 (2000), 157-71. These are also absent from *FE*'s bibliography.

based on topography, climate and etymological evidence and concludes, as Gnoli had, that the Iranian plateau is absent. A.S. Shahbazi, on the other hand, challenges Gnoli's suggestion that the 'idea of Iran' as a national entity was first forged in the Sasanian period and traces it all the way back to the time of Darius. He also demonstrates that Gnoli's idea was not a new one, but existed already in the 19th century. While Shahbazi's main points are probably correct, he must use *argumenta ex silentio* to make some of them, and others rely on evidence of questionable relevance for the period under consideration (such as Plutarch's account of Darius III's prayer to the 'gods of his race' as evidence for the concept of an 'Aryan nation' during his time, p. 103). Shahbazi's paper, though, provides for the book a crucial centre-point, illustrating how the act of naming figures in the construction of identity – a theme implicit in the series title and inherent to many of the issues discussed in the other papers. Each paper in *Birth* is followed by footnotes with up-to-date references, and a common bibliography is found at the end of the book. The lack of an index is not surprising for a collection of papers, but regrettable given the overlap of subject matter. The black-and-white illustrations included with some of the papers are adequate, and technical errors are few.

As the papers in *Birth* attest, consensus remains elusive for many aspects of Achaemenid culture, especially religion. With divergent views on the same subjects collected in a single book, however, it is clear that the 'point' lies not always in reaching a consensus but in exploring the possibilities and shades of interpretation. This is easier to achieve in a collection of scholarly papers than in an introductory medium like an historical survey or museum catalogue. In *PE*, A. commendably balances introduction with interpretation, if at times speculative; and what *FE* lacks in interpretive analysis it makes up for in range of viewpoints and wealth of evidence (and images). These three new publications bear witness to a thriving, international field of Achaemenid studies and illuminate an empire that is far from forgotten. Together, they also illustrate the ideological frameworks in which the field has emerged and continues to evolve.

University of Richmond, VA

Elizabeth P. Baughan