

*The Greek Wars: The Failure of Persia.* By GEORGE CAWKWELL. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. iv + 316. Paper, \$45.00. ISBN 0-19-929983-8.

George Cawkwell's treatment of the Greco-Persian conflict from the Persian point of view is revisionist history at its very best. It is true that such an approach is no longer novel, thanks, in large part, to the work of Pierre Briant, Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenberg and Amélie Kuhrt (whom the author generously acknowledges). But C. nevertheless provides the most insightful and comprehensive analysis to date of Greek and Persian interaction from Cyrus to Alexander.

C. begins by offering a comprehensive condemnation of the Greek writers on Persia, virtually all of whom, he argues, made little attempt to understand Persian society and the political and social relationships fundamental to the kingdom. Greek writers, historians and others, lacked the will or imagination to understand situations from the Persian point of view. Even when they might have known better, Greeks continued to traffic in half-truths, misleading stereotypes and "panhellenist claptrap" (one of C.'s particular objects of scorn). The result is that the Greek historians are systematically unreliable on Persia, and any sober analysis of the historical relationship between Greeks and Persians needs to go far beyond their viewpoint. That is what C. does, bringing his customary independence of judgment and droll wit to bear on the centuries-long conflict between the two peoples.

The treatment of the Ionian Revolt and the wars of 490-479 serve as excellent cases in point. On the first, C. dismisses nearly in its entirety Herodotus' account, laden, as it is, with misunderstandings of the ways of the Persian empire (C. notes, e.g., that vassals of the King could not act independently), an exclusive focus on the personal motivations of the actors and a clear hostility to the Revolt's aims. C. revives De Sanctis' view of Aristagoras as a hero of Greek liberty, and shows that his strategy (which was limited and not the full-scale assault on the Persian empire that Herodotus suggests) was realistic and that, had the Ionian Greeks received better support from their compatriots, independence from Persia was not a dream: the Athenians later showed how naval power could keep Persia from the islands and coastal lands. It is disappointing, however, that C., who is so good at looking at the larger context, dismisses any consideration of political or economic motives for the Revolt, and his argument that it was motivated by a Greek passion for liberty seems more appropriate for Herodotus than a hard-headed modern scholar, even if C. demurs by saying that his "hypothesis is weakly grounded, more properly to be called a presumption" (p. 74). Be that as it may, C. observes that one important consequence of the Ionian Revolt was

that it bought time for the mainland Greeks, since an attack by the Persians in 497 would have found them largely unprepared, and had such an invasion been under Darius' capable command, it likely would have fared far better than Xerxes'.

For the wars on the mainland, C. offers a provocative attack on the usual picture. Marathon was important only to the extent that it showed the Persians that they would need a full-scale invasion to conquer Greece. Salamis is even more harshly dealt with. Contrary to general opinion (both ancient and modern) that the battle saved Greece, C. argues that Persian success from the beginning rested on land warfare—having forced the gates at Thermopylae, the King could have marched his troops to the Isthmus—and the Persian navy had been needed only to bring supplies until the army could pass Thermopylae. Though Salamis was a defeat, it was irrelevant (an example of the King's *folie de grandeur*: p. 109) and had no bearing on the ultimate outcome of the war. The Persians consistently committed errors of strategy. Their decision to retire from Attica was foolish, for the Athenians could not have endured an entire winter away from their city. Likewise at Plataea, Mardonius' decision to attack was extremely foolish: Pausanias' delay, "far from masterly" (p. 113), was instead an indication that he and his colleagues thought there was no hope of victory. C. observes that the Persian cavalry attacks had been so successful in harming Greek morale that if they had continued they would almost certainly have destroyed the precarious unity of the Greek forces, and caused most of them to abandon the campaign. But defeat on the battlefield, once it came, was decisive—"It was at Plataea, not at Salamis, that the new satrapy was lost" (p. 103)—and the Persians, lacking supplies, were forced to depart.

Although the thread of Persian ineptitude runs through this volume (and is meant to serve as a corrective to excessive praises of Greek valor), C. is nevertheless careful to exonerate the Persians from charges of slowness and hesitation. He points out repeatedly that the mustering of army and (especially) navy was a complicated affair and could take years to carry out properly. No less important, the vital heart of the Persian empire lay elsewhere, and the vastness of that empire meant that the King constantly needed to decide where and to what extent he would use his forces. (Only the Greeks were obsessed with the Greeks.) And when defeat finally came, it was the superior Macedonian army, not a lack of Persian valor, that caused it.

In a review one can do no more than offer a few examples, but the reader can expect similarly thoughtful and provocative insights throughout this volume, from Cyrus' conquest to Alexander's. The writing is crisp, though a stronger editorial hand might have helped: material is sometimes repeated verbatim (cf. p. 24 n. 21 with p. 29 n. 61; the same remark of Macan's quoted on pp. 111 and 120

n. 29); a number of references are garbled (pp. 41, 51); and spelling is inconsistent (Cimon ... Kimon, pp. 133–4; Pissouthnes ... Pissuthnes, p. 145, within two lines). These are minor distractions, however, and do not lessen the delight of this volume. And an important volume it is: as the popular history market continues to churn out treatments of the “Greek miracle” and its importance for “Western civilization,” it may be hoped that C.’s book will serve as a useful corrective for those still interested in history rather than myth.

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