

BOOKREVIEW

Kings, Countries, Peoples: Selected Studies on the Achaemenid Empire. By PIERRE BRIANT. Translated by Amélie Kuhrt. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017. Pp. xxv + 634, with 25 bw-illustrations. Hardcover, € 99.00. ISBN 978-3-515-11628-2.

In this volume, a selection of articles written by Briant—initially published between 1979 and 2008 and originally all in French and of varied length—now first becomes available in English translation. The essays, translated by Amélie Kuhrt (herself also a renowned scholar in the field of Achaemenid and Ancient Near Eastern studies), deal with a range of topics, from regional studies to more universal subjects. In total, 28 papers have been included in this collection of which the name, not coincidentally, may remind the reader of another work by Briant (*Rois, tributs et paysans. Études sur les formations tributaires du Moyen-Orient ancien*, Paris: Les belles lettres, 1982). That book constituted the first collection of previously published papers by Briant (papers dating to the period 1972–1982). The volume under scrutiny perhaps may be seen as a sequel to that volume.¹ What connects these papers is that they throw a coherent light on some issues which are, obviously, close to Briant's heart.

Prior to Briant's Foreword (1–42) and Introduction (43–76) the reader finds a list of works until the present day by Briant (ix–xxiv), showing the variety of subjects he has written on. From this vast array, he selected for the volume under scrutiny papers that deal with subjects returning, in one form or another, time and again throughout his work. They concern the relationship between Achaemenid power (be it central or satrapal) and (specific) regions (Asia Minor in part 1, three papers (77–168); Egypt in part 2, five papers (169–252)), the Achaemenids' attitude towards land and water (part 3, six papers (253–358)), various forms of communication inside the Empire (part 4, four papers (359–428)), and -as might be expected- the transition from the Achaemenid Empire to Alexander III of Macedon and the ensuing Hellenistic Kingdoms (part 5, nine papers (429–610)).

As the field of Achaemenid studies is very dynamic, new developments are bound to occur and older views therefore (with some frequency) need to be re-

¹ In 2008 a collection of papers by Briant, translated into Persian was published in Tehran (*Central Power and Cultural Polycentrism in the Achaemenid Empire*). Nine out of the 23 papers included in that collection have also been included in the volume under scrutiny.

assessed to avoid them becoming obsolete (also see Briant's remark on this issue (2)). Though the content of all articles has been left unaltered (each with its original bibliography), Briant has provided an 'update' for most of the papers incorporated in this volume. These updates are not added to the relevant articles as addenda, but are discussed in the 'Foreword' (with its own extensive bibliography). Briant has used this opportunity of the 'collective re-evaluation' to delve more deeply into some matters than he perhaps could have done by adding his comments per paper.

The reader is, admittedly, forced to return on a frequent basis to the 'Foreword' to check whether, and if so which, additional remarks to the original have been made. It might seem a time-consuming way to proceed, but in the end it is a way the reviewer could deal with without too many problems, even more so because it enabled Briant to underline and/or indicate the coherence of issues discussed in different articles. I think that by discussing developments article by article, such coherence might well have been less easy to make clear. At the same time, this collectivity also enables the interested reader to follow the evolution Briant's views, too, went through.

Within the limited space of a review it is virtually impossible to discuss all articles of this volume or even a selection of them without doing some injustice to the author by (over-)simplifying his arguments. One exception I will make is for the first paper, printed as this volume's 'Introduction' and elucidated on 3–6 of the 'Foreword'. The article's title (more or less a precise statement of the intentions expressed by the volume's title) already can be regarded as one of the main themes in this this volume (and, indeed, in Achaemenid studies in general): "Central Power and Cultural Polycentrism in the Achaemenid Empire. Some Observations and Suggestions."

This paper, first published in 1987, starts with the observation that: "Among the empires of Antiquity, the Achaemenid empire presents historians with a number of fundamental questions ... Prominent among them, there is one relating to the empire's structure ... The problem we face is that of the nature and effectiveness of the power exercised by the Great King and the ruling group over ... a state whose ethno-cultural diversity is its most striking characteristic" (43). In five stages, each falling apart in several subdivisions, Briant attempts to phrase lines of

inquiries which may yield some results.² Obvious is that—unlike previously assumed—Greek writers will not provide us with conclusive answers, since they were more often than not writing on the basis of their own ideological agenda and were incapable (or worse) of grasping the (peculiarities of the) Achaemenid world.³ Notably the Greeks' image of the Achaemenid empire as being decadent to the core is not supported by the facts we do have (as Briant also underlines in the paper referred to in my note 2). Instead, these very facts ultimately show a remarkable resilience, sturdiness, and cohesiveness of the ruling class in the empire. The ultimate testimony to that might well be Alexander's attempt to adapt the Achaemenid structures (and frequently also their officials) for his own use.

In summary, this volume brings together several papers that were previously published in French by Briant and have now been made accessible for a larger Anglophone (but, I think necessarily as yet, specialized) audience, making it thereby a significant contribution for an emerging group of students of the (post)-Achaemenid world. The translation, by Kuhrt, is essentially accurate and above all preserves the focus and precision of the original articles. Regrettably the volume presents some typos (already in the table of contents, on v). Nevertheless, the volume is further well taken care of. An index of names (611–617), an index of places and people (618–623), and a specified index of various kinds of ancient sources (624–633) make it, moreover, also accessible for cursory readers.

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² Briant returned to this issue, *inter alia*, in a paper entitled 'L'histoire achéménide: sources, méthodes, raisonnements et modèles', *Topoi (Orient-Occident)* 4(1) (1994), 109-130 (not included in this volume), a (sometimes polemical) paper directed against views expressed by T. Petit.

³ Frequently demonstrated since, lastly in a paper by Yazdan Safaee, 'Achaemenid Women: Putting the Greek Image to the Test', *Talanta* 48-49 (2016-2017), 61-92.