

RECENT REAPPRAISALS OF THE GREEK ACCOUNTS OF PERSIA

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More and more scholars are lately beginning to realize that the history of Persia as presented by the Greeks is one-sided and myopic. As Joseph Wiesehoffer observes: “In Europe we have come to recognize that our Western civilization is only one among many others; and that although culturally – and above all, economically and politically – successful and astonishingly versatile, it has no claim to be exemplary. The attempt to break free from an exclusively European outlook and to gain new spiritual perspectives on other foreign cultures has broadened the study of ancient cultures to embrace those on the 'margins' of the Graeco-Roman world, among them that of early Iran.” (*Ancient Persia*, London-New York, 1996, p. X).

He also rightly asserts that “the fact remains that there are areas of Iranian culture and social life that cannot be understood without their roots – that is, without exploring traditions which go back to pre-Islamic times.” Such a study of ancient Iran he asserts can “avoid the pitfall of regarding Greece and Rome as the centres of the world, a way to stand back from certain standards of value, ethnic typologies and prejudices that were already established in antiquity and are still in circulation to this day.” The closeness of ancient Iran with the Graeco-Roman world along with its exoticism can enable us to understand these two worlds in a proper light.

While concocting the idea of Persian decadence the Greeks even alleged that the scheming Persian women contributed a lot to it. Wiesehoffer quotes from a German textbook of Greek history written as late as 1977 which reveals the Western bias so clearly: “Despite unmistakable aptitudes, the Persians soon fell victims to the impoverishment of the Orient; the end of Persia culture is leveling, not individualization as in Greece. Hellas on the other hand, again and again over the centuries supplies the Persian empire with new forces and new life through its artists, physicians and scholars; it received nothing or little in return, and for the most part only material return gifts. But the Greek spirit truly became the leaven of a whole world both West and East.” (p. 86).

He sees its roots in such biased testimonies as well as in the view of antiquity in nineteenth-century Germany. “The idea arose that the Germans were particularly close to the Greeks of antiquity because of their spiritual and natural affinity.”

As Wiesehoffer well observes, Western writers tended to see Greeks and the despotism of the Persians supposedly leading to the contrast between the cultural achievements of the Greeks – and the arrested development of the mental capacities of their eastern neighbours – allegedly hampered by the despotism and a theocratic and authoritarian hierarchy of priests. Such an antimony persisted even when the common origin of the Iranian and Germanic races and languages was discovered or when the belief in a culturally highly superior Indo-Germanic people came into effect. Even so, it did not change the old Greekophile disposition of the Germans even though this discovery singled the Persian race out from the community of other Near Eastern peoples. The older prejudicial picture of the Persians is still reflected in recent textbooks. (p. 87).

In addition to the Greek notion of Persian decadence, Wiesehoffer cites the attempts in 1942 by a well-known German linguist, Walter Wust for finding and attributing the deeper causes for the negative evolution of the Persian empire and attributed them to the racially and biologically determined negative influences of the 'Semitic' Orient on the 'Aryan' Persians.

After World War II such a view still persisted not only in Germany but also other Western circles and propagated the political, cultural, military and moral decline of the Persian empire. It is only in recent years that such Hellenocentric views have been superseded by pronouncements that take into account diversity and expressiveness of the sources, the strengths as well as weaknesses of the Persian empire and the variegated aspects of Graeco-Persian relations.