

REVIEW

THINKING WITH BRIANT

Pierre Briant, *Kings, Countries, Peoples: Selected Studies on the Achaemenid Empire*, translated by Amélie Kuhrt. Oriens et Occidens Bd. 26. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017. Pp. xxv + 629, 25 figs. Hardback, €99.00. ISBN 978-3-515-11628-2.

This valuable work comprises translations into English by Amélie Kuhrt of twenty-eight writings in French by Pierre Briant, mainly articles or conference papers, along with two one- or two-page notes and an ‘extract’ from a long study originally split over two issues of *Studi Ellenistici* of the so-called *kattarraktai* of the Tigris. The earliest of the works translated dates from 1976 and the latest from 2008; nearly half date from the 1990s; most of the remainder are more recent. At the front is a bibliography of 246 published works by Briant from 1964 to 2017, with a further twelve items listed as forthcoming. A foreword by the author notes that this is the third collection of his articles, the first republished in the original French and the second translated into Persian. The statistics alone are suggestive of Briant’s towering place in the modern study of the Achaemenid world.

The articles are grouped not by date of original publication but by five themes familiar to those who know Briant’s *oeuvre*: ‘Asia Minor’; ‘Egypt’; ‘The Great King, Land and Water’; ‘Communications and Exchange’; and ‘The Transition from the Achaemenid Empire to Alexander and the Hellenistic Kingdoms’. Some users of this book may regret that Briant chose not to add an updated bibliography at the end of each article. Instead the foreword (twenty-nine pages) discusses in detail the reactions of other scholars to his work, both positive and questioning, presented under the same five headings under which the articles themselves are grouped, and ending with ‘A partial summing up’ (just over three pages). A relatively short bibliography appended to the foreword limits itself to works specifically relating to the articles translated in this volume. In addition, the footnotes to the main text of the foreword give a wealth of further references to modern work.

The collection is introduced by an important paper dating from 1987 which summed up Briant’s thinking at that time about the ‘structures and functioning’ of the Achaemenid empire and which introduced his idea of a ‘dominant ethno-class’ of Persians forming a more or less exclusive ruling stratum, a model influenced by the ideas of the late Louis Robert and which Briant now qualifies, but by no means rejects (5).

Bearing on Louis Robert's ideas in the Asia Minor section that follows is Briant's re-study (1998) of the so-called Droaphernes inscription from Sardis first published by Robert. This purports to record the setting up of a statue (*andrias*) by an Achaemenid official in a local sanctuary of 'Zeus'. The Greek text immediately goes on to record cultic regulations which may (so Robert) or may not (Briant and others) emanate from the same official (with important implications if they do for Achaemenid 'religious policy'). Since the letter-forms date from Roman-imperial times, the inscription raises the additional question of *cui bono*, not to mention that of authenticity. The text remains controversial, as do the other two discussed in the next two chapters—the Xanthos Trilingual and the Letter of Gadatas respectively, both of which are taken by some scholars, as with the Droaphernes inscription, to be evidence for imperial Achaemenid interventions in local cult *via* royal officialdom in the provinces. The Letter, like the Droaphernes text, has letter-forms of Roman-imperial date, and here Briant's position is particularly sceptical as to authenticity; he suggests a literary context for the generation of the text, one worthy, it might be added, of the age of the second sophistic when the inscription was commissioned. The methodological questions raised by Briant in his handling of these inscriptions have a wider relevance. The overall thrust of his position is clear: the historical reality of an Achaemenid 'religious policy' in Asia Minor is dubious (ditto the 'horticultural policy' of Achaemenid 'gardener-kings').

The five chapters comprising Part II ('Achaemenid Egypt') are a further example—as is pretty much the whole collection—of the much wider spectrum of ancient history touched on by Briant's pursuit of the Achaemenid past than the section-titles of this collection alone might suggest. For instance, Chapter 7, on the Persian period in Ptolemaic inscriptions (first published in 2003), presents his questioning view of the modern claims for an Egyptian 'nationalism' in antiquity (and, *pari passu*, of the 'welcome' which Egypt gave to Alexander in 332 BC according to the pro-Alexander classical historians). Specifically, he considers the recurrent presentation in official texts such as the Adoulis inscription of the return to Egypt by successive Ptolemies of Egyptian cultic paraphernalia supposedly removed by the Achaemenids. While these propagandistic claims cannot be rejected outright, given the poverty of the sources for Achaemenid Egypt, Briant gives strong grounds for not taking them at face value. He suggests in doing so (230) the relevance to the ancient reception of these royal eulogies of the famous claim in Arrian's preface to the *Anabasis* (1.2) that Ptolemy's history of Alexander was to be trusted, because mendacity was particularly dishonourable (*aischroteron*) for a king. In the next chapter, on multilingual inscriptions of the Achaemenid age and their accompanying imagery, Briant's careful discussion cautions against a modern view, even when contemplating such a monument as the Egyptianising statue of Darius I from Susa, that the Achaemenid kings in Egypt were 'simply

pharaonised and Egyptianised'. Thus the accompanying text stresses the 'Persian nature' of (in this case) Darius's power, anticipating the way in which the Ptolemies recalled their Macedonian origins—one might add, right up to the end (the Donations of Alexandria).

Part III ('The Great King, Land and Water') has six chapters dealing with 'the material foundations on which Achaemenid imperial domination rested, in particular land and water' (15), a question highlighted by archaeological and documentary discoveries in Bactria/Afghanistan, as noted by Briant (16), although these are not the focus of the translated papers included here. Chapter 12, from 1994, is a detailed analysis, based, as always with Briant, on a careful weighing of the classical writers, including ones of known inadequacy (e.g., Ctesias), of the significance of the supposedly exclusive sourcing of the water drunk by the Great King from the River Choaspes. Briant accepts this tradition as authentic, excludes a religious motive and argues persuasively for medical and security factors as well as the compulsion to demonstrate royal luxury. Chapter 13 discusses Polybius 10.28, a well-known passage describing a Persian system of underground water channels and wells funnelling water from the Elburz into the deserts of northern Iran for the benefit of farmers, where Briant displays his characteristic exactitude in pinpointing the meaning of ancient texts, in this case to highlight the technical shortcomings of Polybius's description, as revealed by comparison with the modern Iranian hydraulic technique known as the *quanāt*. Even so he leaves in no doubt his view of the importance of the passage as evidence for an Achaemenid policy which encouraged peasants to make the investment so as to put land into cultivation by then rewarding them with the use of it over five generations, citing as well modern disagreements with his position (e.g., 28 n. 96).

Part IV ('Communications and Exchange') has four chapters, including (Chapter 18) a collaborative paper (1998) with Raymond Descat adding further observations on the Aramaic document surviving as a palimpsest on an Egyptian papyrus which records the register of monthly arrivals and departures of a total of forty-two ships at an unidentified royal customs post in Achaemenid Egypt—the authors suggest Thonis at the mouth of the Canopic branch (405)—over one regnal year of an unknown Great King: a revelatory yet tantalising glimpse of the complexities of Egypt's import-export trade, the taxing of which was surely a consideration for the founder of Alexandria.

Part V ('The Transition from the Achaemenid Empire to Alexander and the Hellenistic Kingdoms') translates nine contributions all of which in different ways inflect Briant's long-held position, influenced as he repeats here (21) by Michael Rostovtzeff (treated more fully in Chapter 21, from 2008), now a somewhat unfashionable figure in some quarters, as to the need to set the question of continuity and change from 334 BC onwards in a *longue durée* giving full weight to the Achaemenid past. Chapter 20 translates the paper first appearing in 1979 which ends by proposing (458) that Alexander, the first

Hellenistic ruler, ‘could be regarded also as “the last of the Achaemenids”’. In the foreword (26–9) Briant notes the continuing polemic to which this position has given rise among ‘several modern historians of Alexander’ and restates the essence of his viewpoint: ‘it is crucial to realize that Alexander had no other imperial model, save the one constructed by the Achaemenids’ (29). The remaining chapters in this section are also, all of them, essential reading for researchers on Alexander and, as always, have much to say that is highly instructive for the handling of the ancient evidence, such as the 1994 paper, here Chapter 22, weighing the evidential value for reconstructing Achaemenid institutions of classical references in an Alexander-context to ‘the *sylogos* of the Medes and Persians’, the chiliarch, the Macedonian royal pages, hunting etiquette etc. (491–2 fruitfully discuss Curtius 8.1.18 as evidence for the Macedonian army seeking to curtail Alexander’s attempt to hunt more in the style of the Great King).

Briant’s style of research and argumentation makes for a volume of enormous richness, the scope of which this review certainly fails to convey adequately. Specialists will find these *opera selecta* of great value, not just for the practical reason that the original publications are often out-of-the-way, but also because the chapters touch with such scholarly carefulness and insight on a strikingly wide range of periods, places, and aspects of antiquity. For teaching purposes, the volume is suitable for advanced undergraduates and should be a boon to those who want to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the problems to which the ancient evidence always gives rise, of the kinds of methodologies needed to approach them, and also of the positions, assumptions, and prejudices which so often shape modern scholarship despite professional claims to objectivity. Finally the translator must be congratulated for her labours, which in a just world would earn her the Achaemenid title of ‘royal benefactor’ (301). On p. 18 the last sentence of the second paragraph perhaps needs to read ‘to be unable’; 495 n. 65: ‘wig’ for ‘whig’.

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