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Matt Waters, *King of the World: The Life of Cyrus the Great*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xvi, 255. ISBN 9780190927172.

Matt Waters has devoted the last three decades of his research to investigating and contextualizing from a historical perspective the life and the deeds of Cyrus the Great, whose figure has been markedly underrated in scholarship despite his outstanding political and military accomplishments. Conceived ‘for a general reader’ (p. IX), this book sets out to comprehensively collect and systematize the different historiographic, archaeological, and artistic sources that were transmitted in diverse cultural milieus, notably Mesopotamian, Persian, Jewish, and Greco-Roman. The author succeeds in providing a consistent and complete chronicle of the significant and far-reaching impact of Cyrus the Great on the history of the ‘Long Sixth Century’, while frequently reminding the reader how unclear and unreliable, if not fantastic, some literary sources dealing with the king can be, in particular Greek and Roman ones.

The first part of Chapter 1 provides a review of several historical and literary contexts in which Cyrus the Great’s importance and prestige emerge. However, Waters correctly remarks that Cyrus’ figure appears to be an irrelevant accident in the history of Ancient Near East, in as much as modern scholarship has seen the Achaemenid Empire as ‘an outlier’ (p. 10). The author makes clear that his book seeks to pursue the question proposed by Pierre Briant about how the dramatic rise of an empire and its founders is almost unknown in the ancient sources despite its rapid and portentous territorial and political achievements (p. 5). The second part of the chapter defines the different stages of the rise of Cyrus the Great’s ancestors as kings of Anshan/Parsumash. Here, the author successfully highlights their strong connections to the Elamite culture that was predominant in the area.

Chapter 2 describes the first step of the historical rise of Cyrus the Great. Waters clearly assumes that the Greek sources dealing with the birth and early life of Cyrus are overlapping, inconsistent, inaccurate and too often unreliable. In these, the life of Cyrus stands out as that of ‘the good Persian’ in contrast to those contemporary Persian kings, such as Darius and Xerxes, who were set on ravaging Greece and its world. In this chapter, the author lingers in particular on the story of the wife and daughter of Cyrus named Cassandane and Atossa, respectively, of whom Herodotus extensively speaks in his *Histories*. This allows him to peruse a nice discussion on the power of the royal women in Cyrus’ court and in the Achaemenid dynasty.

The story of Cassandane and, in particular, Atossa is included in the context of the establishment of the family link between Cyrus the Great, who appears to be a descendant of Teispes in some early inscriptions, and the Achaemenid family and Darius the Great. Waters addresses again, and enriches in detail, the question of the Teispid or Achaemenid origin of Cyrus’ family in Appendix C (pp. 195–205).

Chapters 3 and 4 recount the decisive and outstanding victories of Cyrus the Great against the Medes, Lydians, and finally the Babylonians. Waters is able to understand the narrow link between the Median and Persian cultures and societies, and in doing so he succeeds in using not only Greek sources but also Mesopotamian ones. Cyrus emerges as a smart and diplomatic young ruler who took advantage of the local, but strong, political power of the Medes, who remained as an important part of his new military and political apparatus. Chapter 3 continues with the description of the astonishing victory of Cyrus over King Croesus of Lydia as reported in the main Greek sources. The choice to include this military campaign in the same chapter dealing with the victory against Medes might explain the author’s intention to consider these two pivotal achievements as leading Cyrus to his conquest of Babylon and the defeat of King Nabonidus.

In Chapter 4, Waters emphasizes Cyrus's desire not only to continue the ideal of Assyrian and Babylonian kingship but also to be the prototype of a universalistic ruler who rules an empire of subjected peoples and not slaves. A central place is given to the comment on the Cyrus Cylinder which is probably the first historical source most commonly used to demonstrate a policy of religious tolerance, in what was perhaps a simple strategic calculation, that later became central to Achaemenid policy.

The author draws the parameters of the formation of Cyrus' empire in Chapter 5. He wisely attributes great importance to the continuity in Cyrus' kingship of earlier Mesopotamian royal titles indicating totality: 'King of the World' and 'King of the Four Quarters' (p. 118). He depicts well the will, and mostly necessity, of Cyrus to build a different kind of political entity in which the king mentors cultural and religious diversity while maintaining strong and unquestionable authority. Waters emphasizes the construction of capitals, in particular the royal one Pasargadae, the formation of an 'international' army, and the supervision and practice over and of different cults by Cyrus in the context of this new political approach for ruling over diverse peoples. As for the religion of Cyrus, the question remains open. If most scholarship agrees that since at least Darius the Achaemenid kings were worshippers of Ahura Mazda (thus Mazdean), and in some cases more precisely followers of a form of Zoroastrianism (see Shaked 2005, and Albert de Jong 2010), it is an important factor of evaluation and remains unclear if or how much Cyrus was comfortable with the Mazdean/Zoroastrian religion, considering the total absence of Ahura Mazda in his inscription and documentary records.

Chapter 6 deals with the legacy of Cyrus. The author provides us with several details on the impact of this figure on later models of kingship in the Eastern and Western worlds, notably that of Alexander the Great. It is worth adding to Waters' research that the figure of Cyrus was well-known in several Christian Byzantine milieus in Late Antiquity and probably Cyrus, who was ignored by Parthian and Sasanian ideologies, might have been rediscovered by the Sasanian king of kings Khosrow I in the seventh century (see Tesei 2024, 146 ff.). In Late Antiquity, the figure of Cyrus was also reevaluated and criticized in Rabbinic literature, in which the Persian king lost part of his favour granted in the Jewish Bible (see Mokhtarian 2010).

Dealing with Cyrus the Great is not an easy task due to the complexity and paucity of sources. Waters succeeds in providing the general reader with a comprehensive book that presents the essential traits and ambitions of Cyrus along with the main achievements that made him one of the core models of kingship in different cultures for centuries.

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