

Foreword

PETER FUNKE / GYÖRGY NÉMETH /
ANDRÁS PATAY-HORVÁTH / JOSEF WIESEHÖFER

Almost exactly 2500 years ago, in 480 BC, one of the decisive clashes of the Persian Wars between the Persians and the Greeks took place in the Bay of Salamis. More precisely, the battle was fought by the ethnically and culturally diverse navy of the Persian Great King Xerxes, son of Darius, which included many Greeks from Asia Minor, and the fleet of the Hellenic League under the command of the Spartan Eurybiades and with significant involvement of the Athenian Themistocles. A year later (479 BC) the Persians and their allies were again defeated, on land at Plataea in Boeotia and at sea at Cape Mycale in western Asia Minor. These battles were attributed world-historical significance in antiquity and, even more so, in the centuries that followed. Yet, the details of what happened, as well as their military-political and cultural impact and detailed evaluation, have been the subject of much controversial research, not least because of the difficult nature of the sources.

While in modern times some politicians and scholars have declared the battle of Marathon, for example, to be the “birth cry of Europe”, others have attempted to relate the significance of these battles to the history of the Persian Empire and the history of the relationships between the Greek *poleis* and *ethne* and the Great Kings. Others have portrayed themselves as the successors of the Greek heroes of Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis and Plataea using this history to legitimise their own rule or political aims and propagate ideas of an insurmountable opposition between ‘West and East’, ‘Asia and Europe’, ‘Occident and Orient’ by depicting the downfall of ‘Greek’ culture in the event of a Persian victory. Others, for example, some classical scholars in Germany during the Nazi era, attempted to separate the two “master nations” (“*Herrenvölker*”), the Persians and Greeks, from the other inhabitants of the Near East (Babylonians, Jews, etc.) and attributed the Persian defeats to the disastrous influence of the Semitic Orient on the (Aryan) Persians. For example, the parallel Hermann Göring drew between the Battle of Thermopylae and the end of the Battle of Stalingrad in early 1943 is particularly well-known in this context. However, false analogies such as these and the misuse of historical arguments have been met with strong opposition and refuted based on close and critical reading of the ancient evidence, among which Herodotus’

“Histories” is of particular importance. Such views are also supported by topographical, archaeological and iconographical findings from the Aegean and monumental evidence from the Persian Empire and through an approach with a global-historical, comparative or *longue durée* perspective. Indeed, the history of the reception of the “Persian Wars” (or “Greek Wars” [Gore Vidal]) in literature, art, music and philosophy has also attracted increasing attention in recent decades.

With this in mind, what can we now say with certainty about the Persian Wars? On the one hand, there is no doubt that the main features of the Persian kings’ expansionist efforts, as well as basic events of the campaigns, are historical, especially those which are, like the battle of Marathon, also attested to archaeologically (for example, by the burial mounds of the fallen Athenians and Plataeans). It is also undisputed that the Persians, having secured the coastal regions of Asia Minor and parts of the Balkans, had a particular interest in the political conditions in the Aegean. Nevertheless, the problems of the sources become apparent when looking at the details: the campaigns of Darius and Xerxes and their generals, as well as the motivations for the actions of the participants, can not be reconstructed in any great detail, and the images of Darius and Xerxes painted by Aeschylus, Simonides, Herodotus and others are more literary or narratological than historical-biographical. On the whole, it is the Athenian view of the conflict that survived to become tradition although, it can be said, this view is certainly not one-dimensional: various perspectives emerge from different genres because of the differing intentions of the authors and artists, and as reflections of the numerous political opinions within the polis. It is also necessary to take into account that the perception of the enemy in the East varied at different times, that various assessments of the Persian *barbaricum* as a counter-world and a place of fascination coexisted and that the pejorative view of the barbarian developed gradually. Worldviews and political practices also varied and could change depending on the political situation.

Cross-epochal and comparative studies of the structural elements of empires have also shown that empires always found it much more difficult to bring a fragmented political world under their control than a large structured region or neighbouring empire. Thus, the geographically, politically and culturally diverse world of mainland Greece and the Aegean, with its internal political struggles and external rivalries, proved difficult to control, as did the mountain and steppe peoples. Accordingly, Darius and Xerxes opted for flexible forms of indirect control rather than the satrapalisation of such areas. The Persian Wars are a prime example of the logistical and infrastructural effort that the Persian Empire had to make in order to succeed in the West, which is evidence against the frequently held assumption that there were plans to enforce direct Persian rule over Hellas.

Conferences and exhibitions celebrating the anniversaries of these battles have been held in many places and with very different aims, questions and results. For example, in 2010, there was a conference on the battle of Marathon (‘Marathon: The Day After’), in 2020, an exhibition at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens (“Glorious

Victories: Between Myth and History’) and a conference at the Cultural Centre of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (‘Thermopylae and Salamis: Assessing Their Importance in the Modern World’). In 2022, there was an exhibition in Munich on the battle of Salamis and a conference at Harvard on the battle of Plataea. Furthermore, a collection of essays on the battle of Plataea (edited by Andreas Konecny) was published in Vienna that same year.

The conference ‘Xerxes against Hellas: An Iconic Conflict from Different Perspectives’ is to be included in the series of celebrations listed above. It was jointly organised by scholars from various Central European countries and attracted speakers from around the world. It took place in Budapest from 28 February to 2 March 2022 but was held in hybrid form due to the COVID-19 pandemic and was, thus, accessible to all those interested in the topic. This conference was intended to bring together scholars of all branches of classical studies and related disciplines to discuss some aspects of the conflict between the Persian Achaemenid Empire and the Hellenic League and the reception of this conflict in antiquity. According to this principle, the contributions compiled in these proceedings are organised in two sections: (i) Graeco-Persian Wars, Diplomacy and Acculturation, (ii) Commemorating and remembering the war.

We received considerable help with the organisation of the conference from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, and the Association of the Hungarian Humboldt Fellows and would like to express our deepest gratitude for this. The publication of the proceedings was generously supported by the University of Münster.

The conference was planned for the 2500th anniversary of a major war but nobody could have foreseen that it would take place at a time when a new war was breaking out in the immediate European region. The impact of this war on the conference was quite significant: the fights on Snake Island (known, in antiquity, as the White Island or the Island of Achilles) were already incorporated into a presentation and the conflict was discussed intensely during the conference breaks. It was extremely depressing that one of the speakers from Russia was unable to come to Budapest, while another colleague from Budapest had to leave immediately before the event in order to rescue his family from Ukraine. We are glad that both these scholars succeeded in submitting their contributions to the present volume. May the publication of the proceedings coincide with the end of this absurd and cruel war just as the conference coincided with its beginning.