

# FROM CULTURE TO CONCEPT: THE RECEPTION AND APPROPRIATION OF PERSIA IN ANTIQUITY

*Rolf Strootman & Miguel John Versluys*

*The conquest of Persia meant not the conversion of Persia to Islam,  
but the conversion of Islam to Persianism (Muhammed Iqbal)*

## INTRODUCTION

In the late 5<sup>th</sup>-century BCE, the (in)famous Athenian Alkibiades won the first prize at the Olympic games with his four-horse chariot. It was the crown on a remarkable career; his triumphant presence in Olympia “was enhanced by a luxurious tent, a gift from the Ephesians, described as ‘Persian’”.<sup>1</sup> Almost a millennium later, in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, and in a different part of Eurasia, we hear about a certain Gobazes, king of Lazica, a mountainous country on the south-eastern Black Sea coast. When this local monarch is allowed to visit the Byzantine emperor, Leo I, he shows up, as the *Life of S. Daniel the Stylite* recalls, “dressed in *Persian* attire”.<sup>2</sup>

These two examples indicate that the Achaemenid (imperial) model apparently had a strong and long-lasting allure throughout Antiquity. This was not just an idea, an “imaginary Persia” that mattered to poets, philosophers and travel-writers, – from Herodotos to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century European Orientalists – and that is still with us today.<sup>3</sup> As the examples above show, ideas and associations revolving around concepts of Persia were already strong and indispensable symbolic currency for both the Ephesians *and* Alkibiades; for Gobazes *and* the Byzantine emperor – or that is, at least, what the king of Lazica hoped for and expected. Large parts of post-Achaemenid Antiquity thus perhaps indeed should be characterized as “living in the shadow of Cyrus”, as beautifully formulated by Garth Fowden.<sup>4</sup>

This shadow, or, in other words, the *ideas and associations revolving around Persia and appropriated in specific contexts for specific (socio-cultural or political) reasons* we propose to call *Persianism*. This is not to suggest that the strategy of the Ephesians in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE or that of Gobazes in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE were identical cultural practices, or that in both cases “Persian” had a similar meaning. On the contrary, Persianism is not to be understood as a monolithic concept. As this book will show, there are many different and differing *Persianisms*. In that

1 Shapiro (2009); Miller and Hölscher (2013), p. 402 for the quotation.

2 Fowden (1993), p. 3–4 with references.

3 The canonisation and development of such ideas, and their relation to one another, is at the core of the field of Imagology, for which see Beller and Leerssen (2007), esp. p. 3–75.

4 Fowden (1993), p. 7.

respect *context* – chronological, topographical and cultural – is key. On the other hand, it seems that it is exactly *through* its appropriation and reworking in these many different and differing contexts over time, that *Persianism* acquired, as it were, its remarkable strength. The epigraph to this essay is a quote from the famous 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup>-century scholar, poet and politician Muhammed Iqbal. In his analysis of the spread of Islam, Iqbal refers to the popular view that the conquest of Persia did not have the conversion of Persia to Islam as a result, but on the contrary, the conversion of Islam to (what he calls) *Persianism*.<sup>5</sup> This narrative of how a cultural and spiritual force can ultimately overcome the military might of a conquering power – an allusion to Horace’s *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit*<sup>6</sup> – says a lot about the strength and efficacy of what apparently had become a powerful *socio-cultural imaginary*, an idea so formidable that according to some it was able to transform Islam.<sup>7</sup> To understand this strength and efficacy, it is therefore necessary to study the many different *Persianisms* over a longer period of time and from a wider array of cultural contexts in relation to one another. That is what this volume sets out to do, focusing on the origins of the idea of Persia, in the period of Antiquity.

With regard to the history and archaeology of the Ancient World specifically, the concept of *Persianism* was first used by Miguel John Versluys in the framework of his research on Nemrud Dağı and what was commonly defined as the “Greco-Persian” style and propaganda of its first century BCE ruler Antiochos I of Kommagene.<sup>8</sup> The term promised to be a convenient shorthand to understand various forms of reception of, and references to, the Achaemenid Empire in the Ancient World that are distinct from direct Achaemenid cultural influence. This latter form of interaction in the context of Persian imperialism during the empire’s existence (c. 550–330 BCE) is commonly known as *Persianization*.<sup>9</sup> A third term that is of relevance here, is *Iranism*, and the related “Idea of Iran”, *i.e.*, the idea of the political and cultural unity of Greater Iran which was introduced in Late Antiquity by the Sasanian Dynasty as a concept of empire known as Ērānšahr or Ērān (Iran). Broadly speaking, “Iran” is in origin a concept of the eastern Iranian world that later travelled to the west, while “Persia” originally is a Mediterranean and West-Iranian

5 Iqbal (1908), p. 154–155; quoted in Iqbal (1964), p. 82; Sherwani (1977), p. 155.

6 *Epistles* 2.1.156: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artes intulit agresti Latio*, “Captive Greece conquered her savage victor (*sc.* Rome), and brought the arts into rustic Latium”. Iqbal in fact *disapproved* of the alleged Persianization of the Muslim world, as he believed that Persian “mysticism” had destroyed the original virility of Islam. But his indirect allusion to the concept of “Hellenism” hints at an important point to which we will return: the centuries-long, dialectic interaction between *Iranian* constructions of “Persia” (as “self”) and *non-Iranian* constructions of “Persia” (as “other” – in both negative and positive colorings, as we will see).

7 For the concept of social imaginary – *sc.* “the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world” (Johnson 1984, p. 6), *i.e.* the basic, collective conception by a large group of people of the world they live in, and carried by shared images, stories, and legends (rather than in a theoretical sense) – see Castoriadis (1975/1987); Taylor (2004); James and Steger (2013).

8 See now extensively Versluys (2016a), elaborating earlier presentations of the concept in Versluys (2012; 2014a; and 2014b). The word has earlier been used in as a shorthand for the adoption of Achaemenid royal style at the Argead court by Paspalas (2005); beyond the field of ancient studies, “Persianism” is sometimes used as a linguistic term.

9 See below, note 39.

concept that travelled to the east, as we will see below. The concept of Persianism thus allows us to study the genesis of the “Idea of Persia/Iran” in both Iranian and non-Iranian historical contexts.

In what follows, we will elaborate on the differences between, and overlaps of, Persianism, Persianization, and Iranism, and outline the position of the present volume towards earlier scholarship to further explain (and problematize) our definition of the concept.

## THE LEGACY OF PERSIA IN WORLD HISTORY

Achaemenid Persia was one of the most successful empires of the Ancient World. Like all great empires, the Persian Empire has known an enduring legacy, and remains to this day in the popular imagination of the “West”, together with the Roman Empire, the best known and most studied empire of Antiquity – and like the Roman Empire *also* in an ambiguous sense, as e. g. the recent success of the film *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) demonstrated. In modern Iran, the Achaemenid Empire has been conceived as a cultural predecessor and (moral) point of reference for present-day Iranians. The evocation of Achaemenid grandeur by the last shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, at the 2,500 year anniversary of Iranian monarchy at Pasargadae and Persepolis in 1971 is a well-known example of a modern use of the “heritage” of Persia to legitimize power and enhance secular state formation.<sup>10</sup> The Revolution of 1979 removed the Achaemenid past from the heart of official national identity, but the association of modern Iranians with the Ancient Persians survived for the sake of tourism at such sites as Naqš-e Rostam and Persepolis, and among Iranian exile communities in the UK and USA.<sup>11</sup> But there is also a rich positive tradition in the West. Until the eighteenth century, the Achaemenids were mainly associated with the pro-Persian tendencies in the Biblical tradition.<sup>12</sup> Islamic-age “Persia”, and the Iranian cultural heritage in general, became in the nineteenth century a considerable focus for scholarship, and a genuine fascination developed in art and literature for what the West came to think of as the highpoint of “Oriental” civilization – a form of appropriation epitomized by Edward FitzGerald’s extraordinary popular and influential adaptation of Omar Khayyām’s poetry (1859).<sup>13</sup> And like so many other

10 A good overview of Pahlavi secular politics and the ideological uses of a pre-Islamic, *viz.*, Achaemenid heritage is provided by Garthwaite (2007), p. 221–252, with further literature on the modernization of Iran at p. 293–294.

11 More recently there has been a revival of interest in the Achaemenid past in Iran itself, too. Significantly, the ruins of Persepolis and the rock-cut tombs at Naqš-e Rostam in the wake of this development became a popular backdrop for photographs of Iranian women removing their headscarves in the context of “My Stealthy Freedom”, a movement initiated in 2014 by the London-based journalist Masih Alinejad, who asked Iranian women to post pictures of themselves on Facebook without the obligatory hijab; the movement attracted considerable attention from the Western media.

12 For the image of the Achaemenids in Ancient Judaism see Gruen (2005), and the contributions by Eckhardt and Fowler to this volume.

13 A process that for now culminates in the *Prince of Persia* franchise (1989–), consisting of a

non-Western cultural imports that were “translated” in the West, the transcultural exchange continuously went forth *and back*.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, this concerns images of Iranian culture during the “medieval”, Islamic period: the idea of a “Golden Age of Persia”, as it was beautifully evoked, and consistently advocated, above all by the late Richard Frye.<sup>15</sup> However, although the words originally had quite different meanings, “Persia” and “Iran” did become interchangeable terms, in which as a cultural term “Persian” normally is preferred to “Iranian”, even though said Golden Age of “*Persia*” (a *western* Iranian region) is associated first of all with eastern Khorāsān, and Central Asia in general, and moreover involves the cultural agency of Arabic- and Turkic-speaking peoples.

This volume is aimed at better understanding the origins of “Persia” as a social imaginary. The idea that the Iranian world under the name of “Persia” is one of the principal civilizational cores in human history, comparable to “Classical Greece” or “China”, originated, we argue, in Antiquity in specific Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid contexts. How did Persia develop from the first world empire in history into an even more extensive “empire of the mind”, to quote the title of a recent book on the cultural history of Iran?<sup>16</sup> As the title of that book once more shows, the primarily *cultural* idea of “Persia” somehow joined hands with the mostly *geographical* idea of “Iran”, a name and a concept that likewise originated in Ancient times. The dialectic cross-fertilization, and ultimately coalescence of “Persia” and “Iran” is another major focus of the present volume.

series of video games, two graphic novels and a Disney movie: though vaguely set in the time of the Sasanian Empire, costume and set design are entirely based on the “Golden Age” of Central Asia, *viz.*, Khorāsān (c. 900–1100 CE), drawing also on the culture of Timurid and Mughal India, to create an imaginary, timeless, and conspicuously non-Muslim “Persia” that is at once Late Medieval and pre-Islamic. On the influence of Khayyām in the West see Biegstrate (2008), with further references.

14 Muhammed Iqbal’s rejection of the “Persianization” of Islam (above, n. 5) is a revealing case in point, for the “Persian” mysticism that Iqbal – a native of British India and one of the founding-fathers of the anti-colonial movement in what is now Pakistan – took issue with, was precisely the form of Persianite “Islamic culture” that European, *viz.*, British, scholars and savants appreciated above all. By juxtaposing the feminine spirituality of “Persia” and the alleged strong, “masculine” nature of *original* Islam, Iqbal moreover used western orientalist stereotype to construct a static “other” in contrast to the modern, regenerated Islamic world that he himself advocated in opposition to British imperialism. For Iqbal’s views on tradition and modernity see Mir (2006), p. 123–124, and for the socio-intellectual context Mishra (2012); see Buruma and Margalit (2004) for the subversion of “Western” ideas in anti-colonial discourse, lightly based on Homi Bhabha’s notion that (colonial) mimicry, *i.e.* the selective adoption of imperial culture by subalterns, “is at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha 1994, p. 86). The concept of “decadence”, leading to cultural stagnation and moral decline, had already been employed by European historians to construct the degeneration of “despotic” so-called Oriental Monarchies such as the Ottoman Empire or the Achaemenid Empire – as indeed the theme of Persian decadence originates with Herodotos’ view that after the establishment of their empire the once-strong Persians became soft and lethargic under influence of the Medes (Redfield 1985). On the theme of Persian decadence see Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1987); Briant (1989a; 2002); Colburn (2011); Lenfant (2001); Llewellyn-Jones (2013); Tuplin (2014).

15 Frye (1988); also see Frye (1962; 1996); Bausani (1962); Axworthy (2008); Starr (2013).

16 Axworthy (2008).

As we already saw, “Persia” as a concept beyond Iran itself has also been used to do something very different, namely to constitute the quintessential (Oriental) Other. The antipathetic views of Persian ‘despotism’ sometimes expressed by some Greek writers of the Classical period have often been appropriated by European states from the early modern period. Thus Aischylos’ play *Persians* was recited – probably in Latin, or perhaps Venetian translation – to the people of Zante (Zakynthos) in 1571 to celebrate the victory against the Ottomans in the Battle of Lepanto (Zante and other Ionian islands had contributed ships to the Christian fleet).<sup>17</sup> During the Greek War of Independence (1821–1832), the Greek-Persian Wars of the early fifth-century BCE were evoked for the sake of “liberating Hellenism from the Ottoman Empire”. The Romantic conceptualization of the Christian inhabitants of Ottoman Greece as the racial and spiritual descendants of the Classical Hellenes, was mirrored in the presentation of the Ottomans as the New Persians, in a popular narrative that juxtaposed “Western” freedom and “Oriental” despotism,<sup>18</sup> best known from Byron’s famous lines,

The mountains look on Marathon—  
And Marathon looks on the sea;  
And musing there an hour alone,  
I dream’d that Greece might still be free;  
For standing on the Persians’ grave,  
I could not deem myself a slave.<sup>19</sup>

Over the last decades, it has become clear how Orientalistic stereotypes have distorted scholarly views of the Achaemenid Empire itself. Especially in the 1980s, leading scholars of the so-called New Achaemenid History like Pierre Briant, Amélie Kuhrt and the late Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg questioned the reliability of narrative sources for the Achaemenids written in Greek, such as Herodotus or Xenophon.<sup>20</sup> We will not further discuss the important topic of Hellenocentric bias and Orientalistic “othering” here.<sup>21</sup> We do want to emphasize however that the simultaneous construction of “Persia” as the summit of civilization *and* as the antithesis to the rival civilizational ideal of “Europe”/“the West”, has in our time again placed the Ancient Achaemenids central stage in scholarly debates on the dialectics of East-West imagology; specifically in the wake of 9-11 and the War on Terror, the European interpretation of the Greek-Persian wars as a confrontation

17 Rosenbloom (2006), p. 157; Hall (2007).

18 Van Steen (2010); for the use of Classical Antiquity in the construction of national identity in modern Greece see the illuminating studies in Hamilakis (2007).

19 From ‘The Isles of Greece’, in *Don Juan*, Canto III (1821). It belongs to the tragedy of his last years that according to his own letters and journals, Byron (who was in fact well-acquainted with the *real* Greece), knew better than that. For Byron’s attitude towards Greece in his later life Beaton (2013) is now fundamental; still valuable is the down-to-earth, though at times condescending, account by Nicolson (1924).

20 See e. g. Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1987) and the essays collected in Kuhrt and Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1987). On the New Achaemenid History see McCaskie (2012), and Harrison (2011a).

21 For Orientalistic tendencies in modern scholarship concerned with the Achaemenid Empire see Harrison (2011a), p. 91–108; Colburn (2011).

between oppositional “Eastern” and “Western” civilizations obtained a second life in the popular imagination.<sup>22</sup>

Paradoxically, in the course of many centuries Persia also came to be identified with such things as beauty, artistic refinement, sensuality, spirituality, and mysticism. The roots of this civilizational ideal are commonly located in the great empires of Iran’s pre-Islamic past. The evolution of this idea of Persia has been well-studied for post-antique periods.<sup>23</sup> Often it is crystal-clear that we are not dealing with a simple form of cultural continuity, or “authentic tradition”, but rather with reception and appropriation – and therefore partly a form of “invention of tradition”.<sup>24</sup> In his opening speech for the 2,500th anniversary celebrations at Pasargadae, 13 October 1971, Muhammad Reza Shah invoked Cyrus the Great as the founder of the modern nation-state of Iran:

O Cyrus, Great King, King of kings, Achaemenian King, King of the Land of Iran! I, the Shahanshah of Iran, offer these salutations from myself and from my nation. At this glorious moment in the history of Iran, I and all Iranians, the offspring of the Empire, which thou founded 2,500 years ago, bow our heads before thy tomb. We cherish thy undying memory, at this moment when the new Iran renews its bonds with its proud past [...].<sup>25</sup>

Of course there is a connection between the celebration of empire and dynasty at Persepolis by Darius I and again by Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, about 2,500 years later. But that relationship is different from the one between Darius and, say, his successor Xerxes I. The Pahlavi shahs’ allocation of Iranian origins in pre-Islamic Antiquity is different from the more common forms of retrospective nationalism, with its emphasis on citizenship and territory. The difference, we argue, lies in the development of an universal *idea* of Persia, that later became associated with the Sasanian imperial concept of “Ērānšahr” (see below), and later with the modern Iranian nation-state as it developed under the Qajars (1795–1925),<sup>26</sup> and especially the Pahlavis (1925–1979).<sup>27</sup> In other words, Persia already had an extensive cultural

22 A surge in popularizing accounts of the Greek-Persian Wars framed the battles fought during these wars as defining moments in history that *Saved Western Civilization* (Strauss 2004, on Salamis), *Changed Western Civilization* (Billows 2010, on Marathon), or *Changed the World* (Cartledge 2006, on Thermopylai); consider also Holland 2005, promoting the Greek-Persian wars in his bestselling book *Persian Fire* as essentially a *Battle For the West*. We already mentioned how Zack Snyder employed Orientalistic clichés for narrative and artistic purposes in his 2006 fantasy film *300*; the sequel, *300: Rise of an Empire*, directed by Noam Murro (2014), introduces contemporary political issues more blatantly by equipping the Achaemenid fleet at Salamis with oil tankers and by having suicide terrorists wearing explosive belts attack the Greeks.

23 See e. g. the *Idea of Iran* series published by I. B. Tauris, London, now consisting of 6 volumes.

24 The recent volume edited by Boschung, Busch, Versluys (2015) now takes stock of current theoretical understandings, explores the application of “inventing traditions” for Antiquity, and underlines the importance of the concept for the study of cultural dynamics in the ancient world.

25 Cited from Garthwaite (2007), p. 253. The identification of the so-called Tomb of the Mother of Solomon (where the ceremony took place) with the tomb of Cyrus is uncertain; see Jacobs (2010), p. 91–92.

26 On Qajar uses of the Achaemenid past see Lerner, this volume.

27 The Pahlavi shahs in particular encouraged the creation of a cohesive national identity that



biography prior to the introduction of nationalism in 19th-century Iran. Current debates about the development of Iranian identity have mostly taken a historicizing approach, focusing on the Iranian past and debating in particular whether modern Iranian identity is based on authentic or invented traditions. This is usually referred to as “the Idea of Iran”, or as “Iranism”. Our concept of “Persianism” takes a broader, more complex view, drawing into the discussion the transmission and adaptation of historical knowledge about “Persia” beyond (Greater) Iran.

To simplify, for Darius and Xerxes, Persia had been a socio-cultural reality: a region (Pārsa) and a locus for dynastic identity. But for the Pahlavi shahs it constituted an “empire of the mind”: a *concept* that also many beyond Iran had been familiar with for more than a century.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the enduring legacy of the historical Achaemenid Empire as the cultural concept of “Persia” – that is, as mnemohistory – the historical social sciences provide us with another reason why the study of Ancient Persia has a relevance that extends far beyond the traditional concerns of Near Eastern philology and archaeology.<sup>29</sup> For the hegemonial system created by the first Persian kings, Cyrus and Kambyeses, and maintained by the rulers of the Achaemenid Dynasty who succeeded them, was the first in a sequence of universalistic world empires that dominated the history of Afro-Eurasia until the modern age.<sup>30</sup> The Achaemenid dynasty can be said to have established the organizational and ideological foundations on which various succeeding empires in the same region were built. Moreover, by loosely uniting the crucial central land mass of what Ian Morris aptly called Afro-Eurasia’s “lucky latitudes”,<sup>31</sup> the Achaemenid dynasty also laid the basis for the

glorified Iran’s pre-Islamic past and saw the Achaemenid Empire retrospectively as the direct predecessor of modern Iran, see Vaziri (1993); Fragner (1999); Marashi (2008). There is some irony here, as Gene Garthwaite (2007, p. 229) pointed out: in 1935 Reza Shah decreed that the modern state should no longer be known as “Persia” but as “Iran”, while at the same time claiming the ancient civilization commonly known as “Persia” as Iran’s cultural foundation.

- 28 The enormous international prestige of “Persia” is perhaps best demonstrated by the widespread idea that the Cyrus Cylinder, a 6th-century building inscription from Babylon containing rather generic Babylonian monarchical ideology, as the world’s first declaration of human rights. A replica of the original Cylinder (which is now in the British Museum, London, with a small piece in the collection of Yale University, New Haven) has long been displayed in the central hall of the United Nations building in New York. On the Cyrus Cylinder and its modern uses see most recently Van der Spek (2014). On the myth of Achaemenid “tolerance” see Harrison (2011a), p. 73–90, and for a crass example of believe in this myth Chua (2009) p. 3–28, cf. Axworthy (2008), p. 15, heaping myth upon myth by explaining the alleged Achaemenid policy of tolerance from “the spirit of moral earnestness and justice” of Zoroastrianism.
- 29 For the extend of Achaemenid networks and cultural influence beyond the supposed borders of the empire see i. a. Allen (2005); Francfort, Ligabu, and Samashev (2006), p. 125–126; and Pshenichniuk (2006).
- 30 For empire as the predominant form of political organization in premodern and early modern Afro-Eurasian history see e. g. Darwin (2007); Bang & Bayly (2011). The most extensive recent history of the Achaemenid empire and its institutions is Briant (1996/2002); for recent approaches see the papers collected in *i. a.* Curtis & Tallis 2005; Tuplin (2007); Jacobs & Rollinger (2010); Jacobs & Rollinger (forthcoming).
- 31 That is, the latitudinal band with the highest agrarian productivity, roughly between 20–35 degrees; see Morris (2011), 81–89.

direct connectivity between the eastern and western extremities of Afro-Eurasia, *sc.* China and the Mediterranean, that would be strengthened during the Hellenistic Period (c. 300 BCE–100 CE), and remain the principal artery for global cultural and economic exchanges until the early modern period.

Following on the pioneering work of Josef Wiesehöfer, the recent surge in academic output concerned with Sasanian history by scholars such as Rahim Shayegan, Touraj Daryaee, Richard Payne, and Matthew Canepa, among others, has given the Sasanian Empire a central place in the study of Late Antiquity,<sup>32</sup> and few would still deny the importance for global history of “the other empire” as compared to the Late Antique Mediterranean under Rome and Constantinople.<sup>33</sup> It probably is only a matter of time before Achaemenid studies, too, will free themselves of the curbs imposed by the traditional, Eurocentric concept of the “Near East”.<sup>34</sup>

The study of the Achaemenid empire and its legacy therefore is highly relevant from the perspective of global history as well. The recent emphasis in historical and archaeological studies on long-term, global developments – climate change, globalization, migration, economic world systems, and so forth – has shifted scholarly attention away from a Eurocentric view of world history (with its traditional focus on the nation-state and the postcolonial experience) towards non-European forms of imperialism and premodern, Afro-Eurasian processes of globalization and cultural encounters.<sup>35</sup> This book aims to play a role in that important development as well.

## FROM PERSIANIZATION TO PERSIANISM

Central to the investigation undertaken in this book and many of the articles, is the question how we should conceptualize the difference between Persianization and Persianism. Studies of the post-antique reception of the Persian Empire are logically more concerned with the *idea* of Persia (concept) than with the first Persian Empire as a historical reality (culture). Studies of the cultural impact of the Achaemenids in Antiquity itself, on the other hand, most often think in terms of straightforward historical continuity alone. We argue, however, that already in Antiquity the idea of Persia plays an important role with all kinds of cultural and political developments. Various post- (or even *circum-*) Achaemenid contexts seem to have been able to construct their own “Persia”, resulting in many different, sometimes even conflicting or incoherent, “Persias”. What we put forward as a hypothesis, on the basis of

32 See e.g. Canepa (2009); Daryaee (2009); Shayegan (2011); Payne (2015).

33 Rome and Persia are now often discussed in tandem, particularly in the context of “the end of Antiquity”, *sc.* the rise of Islam; see e.g. Greatrex (1998); Howard-Johnston (2006); Dignas and Winter (2007); Fisher (2011).

34 The present trend in emphasizing “Near Eastern” influences on the “West” of course does not help to deconstruct the essentialistic view of a bounded, amorphous “Near East”, as opposed to the alleged “Classical” cultures (a term that has been all but abandoned by historians and archaeologists concerned with the Ancient Mediterranean; cf. Strootman (MS).

35 For current trends in history see Armitage and Guldi (2014). For Ancient History also see the papers collected in Pitts and Versluys (2015).



the overview that the papers in this book provide, is that it was particularly in the Hellenistic and early Roman Eastern Mediterranean and Near East that the idea of Persia fully developed as a more or less coherent concept.

From the second century BCE, a varied cultural habitus developed that can be described as Persianistic as it revolves around the appropriation of an idealized past through the re-use or invention of imagery and ideas associated with the Achaemenid past. At the heart of Persianism therefore is the concept of cultural memory – that is, the deliberate construction of meaningful common knowledge of an historical period, often for political, or other socio-cultural, purposes<sup>36</sup> – and Jan Assmann’s dictum that the past is constantly “modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present.”<sup>37</sup>

The Achaemenid “revival” of the late Hellenistic period took place especially among former Seleukid vassal dynasties in western Iranian lands such as Pontos, Kappadokia, Armenia, and Kommagene. Here kings like Mithradates VI of Pontos or Antiochos I of Kommagene claimed descent from Achaemenid ancestors. How was in these kingdoms knowledge of the Achaemenid Empire transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imagined and represented? It is remarkable that the Arsakids of Parthia, even though they controlled the Iranian Plateau after c. 150 BCE, and had access to Persepolis and the rock reliefs at Bisotūn (to which they added several more reliefs themselves), seemed not very knowledgeable of the Achaemenids or interested in an Achaemenid revival. Could the difference be that the western rulers, who often were (or at least claimed to be) of mixed Macedonian-Iranian descent, had better access to Classical Greek writings on Persia than the post-Seleukid rulers in Iran itself?

It is through the continuous appropriation, reception studies have taught us, that there (slowly) develops some core understanding of what the idea of “Persia” would be in a long-term process of canonization. It is important to realize that this process started already in Antiquity itself from the moment that the Persian Empire emerged to play its remarkable historical role on the Mediterranean and Near Eastern stage. Culture and concept may overlap, as we will continue to stress below. Margaret C. Miller has shown throughout her important work, and in her contribution to the present volume, that “Persia” was already in part a deliberate construct from the heartland, Pārsa, *sc.* the hybrid dynastic identity of the Achaemenid family; in part it was dependent upon local patterns of reception. The “Persian” fashion in Athens after the Persian Wars, called “Perserie” by Miller (a variant of the *Turquerie* and *Chinoiserie* of eighteenth-century Europe) has been well studied by her and others.<sup>38</sup>

There exists, however, no long-term study of the idea of Persia, what we perhaps should call the *cultural memory* of Persia, and its contextual appropriations in Antiquity. Most scholars understand the relations between the Achaemenid Empire, its neighbors and its successors in the Ancient World in terms of acculturation and cultural tradition: what can be characterized as *Persianization*. The concept of *Per-*

36 For the concept of ‘cultural memory’ see Assmann (1992).

37 Assmann (1997), p. 9.

38 See e.g. Miller (1997; 2010).

*sianization* has been defined as the cultural influence of Achaemenid Persia on other peoples and cultures resulting in the selective adoption of Persian cultural traits.<sup>39</sup> *Persianization*, thus, is a (specific) form of acculturation. *Persianism* is something different and implies that there is a certain distance, in time and/or space, between the Persian Empire as a historical reality and Persia as a concept or idea. *Persianism* thus differs from *Persianization* in that it is less a response to the Achaemenid Empire as a political reality but rather the post- (or *circum*-)Achaemenid construction of cultural memory in the context of new and varied political and cultural contexts (e.g. the collapse of the Seleukid Empire in the later second century BCE or new cultural encounters in the Roman Mediterranean and Near East). Of course, as already underlined above, Persianism will have been in part informed by, and itself will have influenced, ongoing processes of Persianization. There may well have been functioning Persianisms within the Persian Empire itself – “Persianisms from the heart”, to speak with Margaret Cool Root.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the diffusion of Persian cultural traits may stretch over time when they have taken the form of a genuine “Persian tradition”: “going Persian” is in itself a form of cultural formation, and thus there is indeed overlap between Persianization and Persianism. However, it may still be useful to try and distinguish between what most often are very different cultural processes. Studying Persianism therefore is not only important to better understand Persianization in Antiquity but also to understand the “birth” and the first and formative phase of that remarkable long and still enduring fascination with the idea of “Persia”.

Focusing on *Persianism* therefore implies that we should reserve, in our interpretations, much more room for the fact that *continuity is a historical product* and that antiquity mattered greatly in Antiquity.<sup>41</sup> We thus propose to use the term “Persianism” to show how the boundaries between culture and concept, between tradition and invented tradition, or between continuity and appropriation often are far less clear-cut than we are inclined to think. This is a pivotal point. As we already pointed out, the appropriation of concepts is in itself a form of cultural formation. What matters about traditions is not the question whether they are real or invented, from our (-etic) perspective, but rather whether they are *perceived* as real and genuine by the community in question (-emic). In that respect there indeed is only a thin

39 Brosius (2010). Cf. the critical remarks by Tuplin (2010). For imperial-local interactions in the Achaemenid Empire Dusinberre (2003) is fundamental, cf. Katchadourian (2012); Colburn and Hughes (2010). It is particularly for the Anatolian province that archaeologists have been trying to make sense of the interplay between “Greek”, local and “Persian” cultural styles, see e.g. Nollé (1992); Summers (1993); Miller (1997); Lintz (2008); Summerer (2008); Kaptan (2013); Katchadourian (2013); Dusinberre (2015); Nieswandt and Salzman (2015); and Briant (2015). Recent studies of cultural interactions in the Hellenistic Near East and Central Asia have suggested that powerful individuals and social groups selectively adopted elements of court culture to construct and negotiate their position *vis-à-vis* the (Seleukid or Ptolemaic) empire, and something similar may be envisaged for local styles in the Achaemenid world (see now the excellent treatment by Colburn 2013).

40 Cool Root (1991).

41 Sahlins (2000). For the past in the past see Ker & Pieper (2014); Porter (2006); Marincola, Llewellyn-Jones, Maciver (2012).