Great and wonderful deeds: the changing historiography of the Persian Wars

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Peter Green, *The Greco-Persian Wars* (University of California Press 1996)

Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 BC* (Routledge 1995)

Robin Osborne, *Greece in the Making 1200-479 BC* (Routledge 1996)

The discipline of history was originally begotten to explain the causes of the Persian Wars, and to tell their story. The publication of two volumes of the *Routledge History of the Ancient World* which cover the period of the Wars, and the reissue of Peter Green's narrative account of the events, originally published as *The Year of Salamis* in 1970, provide an opportunity to assess the development of writing about the Persian Wars, if not right back to Herodotus, then at least since histories of Greece have been written in modern Europe. The Routledge volumes fill gaps in the range of works available in their area, and are likely to become standard textbooks for students and invaluable for academic research. Green's book is less likely to be consulted, but more likely to be read for pleasure: it is the work of an historian who is aware of the difficulties of his task, but also of a writer who constantly puts individual characters at the centre of his story.

The way that twentieth-century writers have approached the history of ancient Greece was determined between the last decades of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth. From the first, modern historians of Greece have been sceptical on matters of religion but politically committed, seeing in Greek history in general, and the Persian Wars in particular, parables for the contemporary world. The first two histories of Greece written since antiquity appeared almost simultaneously. In 1786, John Gillies published *The History of Ancient Greece, its Colonies, and Conquests; from the Earliest Accounts till the Division of the Macedonian Empire in the East. Including the History of Literature, Philosophy,*

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and the Fine Arts, In Two Volumes. The date, soon after American Independence, is significant. Gillies dedicated the work to George III with these words:

> Sir,
> The History of Greece exposes the dangerous turbulence of Democracy, and arraigns the despotism of Tyrants. By describing the incurable evils inherent in every form of Republican policy, it evinces the inestimable benefits, resulting to Liberty itself, from the lawful domination of hereditary Kings, and the steady operation of well-regulated Monarchy.

There are places in the work where it is difficult to avoid contemporary resonances, for example in Gillies' depiction of Ionia after the failure of the Ionian Revolt: 'The Ionians became an object of care and protection to Darius . . . The face of the country began once more to smile' (p. 280). The passage goes on to describe the fertile land, the agreeable climate and the flourishing communities, suggesting perhaps that a similar fortune might have blessed the American colonies, had they returned to British rule. Gillies' Spartan soldiers, with their 'scarlet uniforms' (p. 101) may well be related to their British successors.

The Persian Wars, however, present something of a challenge for the thesis that Democracy or Republicanism are dangerous or evil, especially given Herodotus' emphasis on the role of democratic Athens (VII, 139), and it is not clear that Gillies' narrative supports his original claim. Indeed, Gillies introduces his account of the invasions of Darius and Xerxes with these words (pp. 281-2):

> The Grecian poets, historians, and orators, dwell with complacence on a theme, not less important than extensive, and equally adapted to display their own abilities, and to flatter the pride of their country. The variety of their inimitable performances, generally known and studied in every country conversant with literature, renders the subject familiar to the reader, and difficult to the writer. Yet does the merit of those performances, however justly and universally admired, fall short of the extraordinary exploits which they describe; exploits which, though ancient, still preserve a fresh and unfading lustre, and will remain, to the latest ages, precious monuments of that generous magnanimity, which cherishes the seeds of virtue, inspires the love of liberty, and animates the fire of patriotism.

The Wars are presented as a three-act tragedy, ending in the defeats of Datis at Marathon, Xerxes at Salamis, and Mardonius at Plataea. Gillies' heroic Greeks fight against effeminate easterners. While he is prepared to allow the Persians some nobility in their past, indicated by their preference for infantry over cavalry, he sees them corrupted by their contact with Greece and Babylon (p. 258). In particular, Xerxes' behaviour after Salamis is an orientalist's fantasy:

> Having returned to Sardis, he endeavoured to compensate for the disappointment of ambition by the gratification of sensuality, and busied himself in pleasures more infamous and degrading, and not less frightfully criminal, than all the disgrace which his pride had incurred, and all the calamities which his subjects had either inflicted or suffered (p. 353).

In contrast to Gillies, William Mitford, the first volume of whose (five-volume) *History of Greece* was published in 1784, could present the Persians as the ideal model for a nation: 'Every authentic account marks the Persians for a people of liberal sentiments and polished manners, beyond almost any others in all antiquity' (p. 409: this and other references are to the second, 1789, edition of volume I). In the preface to his work, Mitford makes no ideological claims, simply noting that, since Greek history was a subject in which everyone was now interested, there was a need for a work such as his. The first volume covers the period down to the end of the Persian Wars, and while the author pays lip-service to the authority of Herodotus, he produces a version of Greek history that is remarkable for its individuality. Above all, his presentation of Xerxes' invasion as a success is a triumph of source criticism. Every depiction of Xerxes as despotic or cruel must be a distortion by Herodotus' informants. Describing Thermopylae, he says:

> The credit due to Herodotus we continue always to find very nearly proportioned to his probable means of information. When those were good, he seldom or never relates absurd tales: when they have been deficient, he never scruples to report any rumor. Information of public orders to the Persian army might come to him; but the actions, and still more the passions, of Xerxes upon his throne, which he pretends to describe, would not be matters of common notoriety (p. 404).

Mitford in fact doubts that Xerxes could even have seen the action, basing his argument on the topography of the place – despite the fact that he himself had never been nearer to Greece than Naples. For Mitford, the destruction of Athens could be seen as a satisfactory climax to Xerxes' campaign, and the subsequent disaster at Salamis could be dismissed, since the fleet was 'not properly Persian, but composed almost intirely [*sic*] of the conquered subjects of the empire' (p. 436). This interpretation is prefaced by a discussion of problems of evidence:

> It is impossible here not to wish for those Persian histories of these great events, which probably once existed, and which a learned orientalist of our own country would flatter us with the hope of still recovering: but most we wish for them when the Persian counsels become particularly interesting, of which the Greek historian has undertaken to give a detail that could not come to him duly authenticated. Not that an author under a despotic monarchy, who often must not publish what he knows or believes, and sometimes may not dare even to inquire, could be put in competition with a republican writer, who not only may inquire everywhere and speak everything, but actually manifests his free impartiality by relating continually, with the ingenious severity of a reproving friend, the disgraces of his fellowcountrymen, while he is often liberal of eulogy of their enemies. We might however possibly draw, even from the flatterer of a despot, some information of which the total wreck of Persian literature hath deprived us (p. 434).

Mitford's treatment of the Persians contrasts with his approach to Athens. Much more consistently than Gillies, he sees democracy as an unmitigated evil. Athens was happiest under the rule of Peisistratus and his sons, and of the period after their overthrow he comments: 'it appears from Herodotus that Cleisthenes was at this time not less tyrant of Athens than Peisistratus had been. His power was equal, but his moderation was not equal' (pp. 301-2). On a rare occasion when he praises the Athenians, for rejecting the embassy of Alexander of Macedon in the winter of 480/479, he cannot resist ending the episode with the Athenian mob stoning their fellow citizen Lycidas to death, and the women and children killing his wife and children in a frenzy (pp. 444-9).

The final volume of Mitford's *History* appeared in 1818, and, despite its peculiarities, it remained the most influential work on the subject until around the

mid-nineteenth century. In a footnote to *Don Juan,* 19.12, Byron comments:

> His great pleasure consists in praising tyrants, abusing Plutarch, spelling oddly, and writing quaintly; and what is strange after all, *his* is the best modern History of Greece in any language, and he is perhaps the best of all modern historians whatsoever. Having named his sins, it is but fair to state his virtues – learning, labour, research, wrath, and partiality. I call the latter virtues in a writer, because they make him write in earnest.

Mitford's *History* was eclipsed by two works which were written almost simultaneously, their writers each ignorant of the other's project, despite the fact that they had been at school together: Connop Thirlwall's eight-volume history, published between 1835 and 1847, as part of Dionysius Lardner's *Cabinet Cyclopedia*, and George Grote's twelve-volume history of 1846-56. In the intervening period, the threat of revolutionary France had come and gone, the Great Reform Bill had been passed in Parliament, with the active involvement of Grote, and the Greek War of Independence had altered European perceptions of Greece itself. While Gillies and Mitford, both Tories, and the latter an MP for a variety of seats, wrote about Greece to illustrate the dangers of democracy, Thirlwall, a liberal Anglican who became Bishop of St David's under Whig patronage, and Grote, a Radical who also eventually became an MP, wrote to show how democracy was compatible with the highest achievements of civilization.

Thirlwall rejected many of Mitford's more extreme views, and his picture of Xerxes is much closer to Gillies' (and perhaps to Herodotus'). Without naming Mitford, he remarks of Herodotus' account of Xerxes' behaviour at Thermopylae that 'we are not at liberty to reject the tradition because such ferocity was not consistent [with normal Persian behaviour]' (II, 290: references from the Everyman edition of 1906). In his depiction of Ionia after the revolt, he emphasizes the loss of Greek freedom, rather than any benefits: 'Thus tranquillity was restored, and order established, though at the expense of liberty' (II, 225). Grote is more emotive: 'the miseries of those days . . . must have been extreme' (V, 29).

It was Grote's history which was the more influential, and it remained the most authoritative work on Greek history until at least the end of the nineteenth century. Like his predecessors, Grote inevitably bases his account of the events of the Persian Wars on Herodotus, although his emphasis is often different from theirs. The most obvious feature of Grote's view of Greek history is his absolute belief

in the greatness and wisdom of democratic Athens. This is most apparent in his narrative of later fifth-century history, but it influences his treatment of the Ionian revolt, not usually considered to be Athens' finest hour. By suggesting that hostility between Athens and Persia was established in 506 BC, when the Athenians refused to take back Hippias, he is able to defend their decision to support the revolt. And rather as Mitford could excuse the Persian defeat at Salamis by claiming that the fleet was not really Persian, so Grote explains the Ionian defeat at Lade by contrasting the discipline of the Ionians with that of the Athenians:

> The reader of Grecian history is usually taught to associate only ideas of turbulence and anarchy with the Athenian democracy. But the Athenian navy, the child and champion of that democracy, will be found to display an indefatigable labour and obedience nowhere else witnessed in Greece – of which even the first lessons, as in the case now before us, prove to others so irksome as to outweigh the prospect of extreme and imminent peril. The same impatience of steady toil and discipline, which the Ionians displayed to their own ruin before the battle of Ladê, will be found to characterise them fifty years afterwards as allies of Athens, as I shall have occasion to show when I come to describe the Athenian empire (V, 21).

Meticulous scholarship in detailed footnotes discussing the chronology of events, as much as the liberal democratic approach to the period, is what sets Grote's *History* apart from its predecessors. It is a tribute to his influence on later writers that so much of his interpretation of events appears uncontroversial today. In 1900, J.B. Bury published his one-volume *History of Greece*, drawing heavily on Grote's work. That work was revised by the author in 1913, and by Russell Meiggs in 1951 and 1975, largely to take into account archaeological discoveries about the Bronze Age. For the period of the Persian Wars Bury's original text is largely unchanged, and his work remains a standard school textbook.

Although they differed in their political views, the eighteenth and nineteenth-century historians of Greece were united by their intellectual background. All their histories of Greece were products of the Enlightenment: Mitford was encouraged in his project by Edward Gibbon, Grote by James Mill. This is most apparent in the treatment of religion, and in particular – in the period of the Persian Wars – the Delphic oracle. Gillies describes the oracle in neutral terms as 'the sovereign umpire of Greece' (p. 93), but Mitford and Grote both suggest that its

responses to the various Greek cities that approached it at the time of Xerxes' invasion were determined more by hard-headed political considerations than by any supernatural power. Discussing the circumstances surrounding the 'wooden walls' oracle given to the Athenians, Mitford comments:

> It was not indeed likely that the prudent managers of the Delphian oracle would prophesy anything very favourable to Athens, so peculiarly devoted to Persian vengeance, when the innumerable forces of that mighty empire were already assembled at Sardis, while the little country of Greece was so unprepared and divided (p. 389).

Grote refers to 'the underhand working of these leading Delphians on the priestess' (V, 176). Mitford's admiration of the Persians is in part based on their rational monotheism: 'the Persians were by nothing more remarkably or more honourably distinguished from surrounding nations, and particularly from the Greeks, than by their religion' (p. 324); and it is arguable that Mitford considered Xerxes' destruction of Greek temples in Asia Minor, after the defeats at Plataea and Mycale, as an item to his credit (p. 476).

The spirit of these writers is still clearly visible in works written in the second half of the twentieth century, most notably in the late George Forrest's *The Emergence of Greek Democracy* (1966), but also in Green's *Greco-Persian Wars*. There were, however, some developments in scholarship in the intervening decades. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the reliability of Herodotus was strongly challenged, and his reputation suffered a blow from which it has only recently started to recover; in the first half of the twentieth century, the evidence of archaeology transformed the understanding of early Greek history. Yet neither of these developments seems to have affected the way the history of ancient Greece was thought about until much later. Green's three hundred pages of text and notes, almost all devoted to Xerxes' invasion, allow him to tell a story in much more detail than even Grote was allowed, but his dramatization of events ('novelization' is a term he might be less happy with), drawing on anecdotes in Plutarch and Herodotus, is very much in the tradition of ancient Greek historiography established by Mitford and Grote. Green does not have an overt political moral to draw from his account, although his final peroration is as emphatic as Gillies':

> Something pure and indestructible had been created in the crucible of war, as carbon atoms, under inconceivable pressures, will coalesce to form a diamond. Throughout all the betrayals and failures which followed, that one bright element still shone clear. The ultimate achievement of such a victory is hard to measure in appreciable terms. So fundamental and lasting a debt almost defies our understanding (p. 287).

In his characterization of Persia he takes note of the very feature that had impressed Mitford, but comes to an opposite conclusion:

> Achaemenid Persia produced no great literature or philosophy: her one lasting contribution to mankind was, characteristically enough, Zoroastrianism. Like Carthage, she perpetuated a fundamentally static culture, geared to the maintenance of a theocratic *status quo*, and hostile (where not blindly indifferent) to original creativity in any form (p. 5).

For Mitford and Grote, democracy was an ideology to be resisted or embraced. Democracy matters to Green as well: his narrative – and above all his presentation of Themistocles, 'this ambitious young merchant-politician' (p. 26), 'the burly, arrogant radical from Phrearri' (p. 48) – is written to demonstrate that it is an imperfect system, not immune from ambition and corruption, but nonetheless a system far superior to any other form of government produced. Clearly, however, it is the democracy of mid-twentieth-century America that is being depicted, not that of early fifth-century Athens.

There is another way of writing about ancient Greece that has developed in the second half of the twentieth century, under the influence in particular of Moses Finley, of which Robin Osborne's *Greece in the Making 1200-479 BC* is a fine example. This kind of history-writing is not much concerned with political history, or indeed with narrative at all. It is (in Osborne's own words)

> a 'total' history, a history which recognises that politics and social organisation, social organisation and economic pressures on the means of life, economic pressures and cultural expression, cultural expression and religious cult activity, all these are part of the same story, and none can be understood without the others or studied in isolation (pp. 17-18).

This has an effect on the presentation of events. In a book of just over 350 pages, the Persians first appear on p. 318. The narrative of the events of Xerxes' invasion takes precisely two pages (357-8), and most of one of these is filled by a map; the Ionian Revolt and the Marathon campaign fare little better, and, rather than a glorious victory, the Greek resistance to Persia is described as 'a learning experience' (p. 343). Green compares Themistocles with Winston Churchill (p. 24); Osborne, discussing the 'wooden walls' oracle and the Themistocles decree, brings in Orwell's Winston Smith (p. 354). Of course this is to caricature Osborne's intention. In his epilogue, he argues that ancient Greece had 'two pasts, the actual past and the past it shaped for itself out of the pasts which successive generations had already shaped for themselves' (p. 355). The stories the Greeks told about their history tell us little about 'the actual past', and attempts to extract 'nuggets of truth' from them are unlikely to be profitable. But this rejection of the politically committed tradition of Mitford, Grote and Green is itself even more clearly politically committed. Indeed, Osborne ends his book with a post-structuralist's call for eternal vigilance (p. 355):

> Our understanding of the achievements of classical Greece is seriously attenuated if we neglect either story [sc. what actually happened or what the Greeks thought they knew about the past] ... Our understanding of the tragic events which have followed the break-up of Yugoslavia is seriously attenuated if we fail to take adequate account of the role played by both the changeable and the unchangeable past ... This book has been written in the conviction that remaining ever conscious that the past is both changeable and unchangeable is both an academic duty and a political necessity.

The geographical and chronological range of Osborne's book were, in broad terms, established in the 1920s, when Methuen first commissioned a series of volumes to make a history of the ancient world. That this meant a history of Greece and Rome was then taken for granted, but the addition to the series of a two-volume work on the ancient Near East, especially with its long chronological span, offers another perspective on the Persian Wars. Mitford's scepticism about the possibility of recovering narrative histories of the Persian Wars written by Persian historians was well founded, but since the early nineteenth century a great deal of documentary evidence has been recovered. This has revealed much about social and economic structures, but little about events. Before Alexander the

Great, the Greeks have little importance for the historian of Persia: in Kuhrt's chapter on the Achaemenids, the Ionian Revolt and Marathon together take up some twelve lines (II, 667-8), and Xerxes' invasion takes less than a page, in a section on 'The western front, 486-431' (II, 670-1). The lines drawn by Methuen in the 1920s create a significant distortion: as Kuhrt points out (I, 1), Greece is itself part of the Ancient Near East. In a free-standing history of the region, the Greeks might have received a single chapter, in parallel with the Persians, Babylonians, Assyrians and the others.

If it is difficult to write a narrative of the Persian Wars because it is impossible to separate out the 'actual past' from the stories told, does it follow that the Greek victory over the Persians was therefore not important? Kuhrt makes it clear that there were continuing 'problems on the Western front' for the Persians in the years after Xerxes' defeat, but no threat to the empire as a whole. The impact on Greece, if the Persians had won, should not be exaggerated: Greek cities under Persian control produced their share of significant literary and artistic figures; at the time when Herodotus was finishing his account of the conflict betwen Greeks and barbarians, Athens and Sparta were each in negotiation with the Persian King for support against the other; and less than a century after the battle of Plataea diplomatic relations between the major powers in Greece were being maintained by the real threat of Persian financial and military interference. However, the Greeks did win in 490 and in 480-79, and they did tell stories about their victory, and it is these stories which, through the work of Herodotus and his successors, have become the material of history, to be retold by later writers down to Peter Green. The Routledge volumes raise questions about that retelling. Is it right to continue to write about the Persian Wars – even to celebrate them – as victories of 'us' over 'them'? (Even Mitford's version of events describes the superiority of hardy Northern hill-tribes over unruly Mediterraneans.) The events themselves, as far as they can be recovered, Osborne's 'unchangeable past', show one group of barely united Eastern Mediterranean communities succeeding in resisting the advance of another Eastern Mediterranean, or Near Eastern, power – a little local conflict. It is the political use made of those events, in the fifth century BC as well as the last three centuries, that has given them significance, whether they are seen as a contest between East and West, liberty and despotism, or civilization and barbarism. As Osborne makes clear, it is the historian's task not only to explain the past, but to examine why it is worth explaining.