Greece and Persia
The war that Created History

OLLIL Fall 2019
Week 1: The Story
Course Overview

What do you know about the Greek-Persian Wars?
Course Overview

Probably This:

• Greece was the birthplace of western civilization, philosophy, and democracy.

• Invaded by the Persians, and hopelessly outnumbered, the Greeks fought a heroic defense, pushed back the forces of oriental absolutism, and saved western civilization.

• Later, Alexander the Great invaded and conquered the decadent Persian empire and spread Hellenistic civilization throughout the east.
Course Overview

This view has been reinforced and driven by popular culture.

From the film *300*
Left, Spartan King Leonidas
Right, Persian King Xerxes.

*(Guess who’s the bad guy.)*
The Course in a Nutshell

• The victors write the history, but what they write isn’t always true.

• Most of what you have been told about Achaemenid Persia and its people is wrong.

• What follows is not new, revisionist theories. It is the result of decades of work by legions of scholars, and is now widely accepted in the historical community.

• Why it is not part of the popular understanding of the event is an interesting question.
Course Outline

• Week 1: *The Story*, and its sources
• Week 2: *The Greeks*—Who they were and why we should care
• Week 3: *The Persians*—Who were they, and *should* we care?
• Week 4: *The Rise of Persia and Athens*—From Cyrus to Darius
• Week 5: *The Great Invasion*—The Stunning Greek Victory
• Week 6: *The Victors Fall Out*—The Peloponnesian Wars
• Week 7: *The King’s Peace*—The Decline of Classical Greece
• Week 8: *Alexander the Demon*—Conquest of the Empire
Week 1: The Story

- Historical Background
- Herodotus, father of history
- The Greek and Roman successors of Herodotus
- The story they told
- The other sources
- What the other sources say
- Why you’ve probably never heard that story
1. Historical Background--
Timeline (overview)

- 1600 BCE: Heroic (Mycenaean) Period
- 1100 BCE: Bronze Age Collapse (Dark Age)
- 650 BCE: Archaic Period
- 480 BCE: Classical Period
- 323 BCE: Hellenistic Period
- 31 BCE: Ascendancy of Rome

499-323 BCE Persian Wars
1. Historical Background--Timeline (continued)

• 1600-1100 BCE: Heroic (Mycenaean) Period
  • 1570: Rise of New Kingdom Egypt
  • 1200: Trojan War

• 1100-650 BCE: The Dark Age
  • 1069: Collapse of New Kingdom Egypt
  • 800: earliest Greek writing
  • 776: First Olympic Games
  • 725-700: Homer composes *Iliad* and *Odyssey*
  • 675: Nomadic Persians settle in Iranian Plateau
1. Historical Background--Timeline (continued)

- **650-480 BCE: Archaic Period**
  - 612: Collapse of Assyrian Empire. Rise of Medes
  - 594: Solon’s reforms in Athens
  - 553-530: Cyrus the Great conquers Medes, Babylonia, Asia Minor and other lands to form the Achaemenid Persian Empire.
  - 522: Darius The Great becomes king, consolidates and reorganizes empire
  - 510: Athenians drive tyrant Hippias into exile.
  - 509: Rome overthrows king, establishes republic
  - 508-7: Athens adopts democratic constitution

**START OF THE PERSIAN WARS**
- 499-493: Ionian cities, with Athenian aid, revolt from Persia, but fail
- 490: Persians send punitive force against Athens, defeated at Marathon
- 482: Athens builds a fleet
1. Historical Background--Timeline (continued)

- 480-323 BCE: Classical Period
  - 480: Persia invades Greece. Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis
  - 479: Defeat of Persians at Plataea and Mykale temporarily ends war
  - 447-449: Wars of the Delian League (later Athenian Empire) against Persia
  - 430: Herodotus publishes Histories (Inquiries)
  - 431-404: Peloponnesian Wars (ends in defeat of Athens by Sparta)
  - 396-5: Sparta invades Persian Asia Minor, but withdraws
  - 395-387: Corinthian War between Sparta and coalition of Greek states
  - 387: King’s Peace (dictated by Artaxerxes II) ends Corinthian War
  - 371-362: Theban Hegemony breaks Sparta’s power
  - 338: Philip of Macedon defeats Athens and Thebes at Chaeronea
  - 323: Alexander dies, his empire disintegrates into warring states.
1. Historical Background--Timeline (continued)

• **323-31 BCE: Hellenistic Period**
  • 323: Greece becomes province of Macedon, Athenian democracy ends.
  • 272: Greeks in Southern Italy conquered by Rome
  • 218-201: Rome defeats Carthage in 2\textsuperscript{nd} Punic War (Hannibal’s War)
  • 211: Rome sacks Syracuse, conquers Sicily
  • 146: Greece (as part of Macedonia) becomes Roman province.
  • 31: Octavian defeats Mark Anthony at Actium. Rome becomes master of the Mediterranean basin.
  • 27: Roman Republic replaced by Roman Empire
1. Historical Background -- Geography

Persian Empire
490 BCE
1. Historical Background -- Geography

Population and Languages
About 500 BCE

Yellow: Semitic
Green: Demotic
Shades of Gray: Indo-European

= 1 million people
2. Herodotus, The Father of History

- Previous historians and chroniclers mostly provided a list of events and when they took place.
- Herodotus set out to tell a multi-generational story with a clear conclusion proving a point (the superiority of the Greeks over the Persians).
- Collected as much evidence as he could. The book was called “Inquiries,” which in Greek is Historias.
2. Herodotus, The Father of History

Herodotus’s two important contributions to History:

• Switching focus from a chronicle of events and elite biographies to an examination of cause and effect over long periods of time.
  • Replaced emphasis on isolated events with multi-generational stories
  • Anticipated the Longue Durée view of history

• A commitment to a systematic search for information leading to an understanding of the truth
  • He did not always discover the truth, but he always did everything in his power to do so.
3. Greek Contemporary Successors

- Thucydides: *The Peloponnesian War*
  - Began where Herodotus’s *Histories* left off. (435-410 BCE)

- Ctesias of Cnidus, *Persica*
  - Sometime physician to the Persian king Artaxerxes II, his accuracy is no longer trusted. Now viewed as mostly court legends and gossip.

- Xenophon: *The Anabasis* (*The March Upcountry*)
  - Recounts Cyrus the Younger’s revolt against Shah Artaxerxes II and the later actions of the “Ten Thousand” (Greek mercenaries) fighting their way back from the heart of Persia. (401 BCE)

- Xenophon: *Hellenica*
  - History of the Greek world beginning from where Thucydides left off. (410-362 BCE)
3. Later Greek and Roman Successors

- Diodorus Siculus: *The Library of History*
  - Drawing on a wide variety of now-lost sources, Diodorus is the most detailed surviving ancient account covering this entire period.

- Arrian: *The Campaigns of Alexander*
  - Draws mostly on the official chronicle of the campaign kept by Ptolemy Soter, now lost.

- Quintus Curtius Rufus: *The History of Alexander*
  - Based on the now-lost accounts of three contemporaries of Alexander. A non-flattering psychological portrait of Alexander.

- Plutarch: *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*
  - Particularly of Alexander, Agesileos, and Artaxerxes II

- Justin: *Epitome of the Philippic Histories*
  - Extracted from Gnaeus Pompeius Trogus, now lost
Greece and Persia
The War that Created History

Question Break
4. The Story They Told

- The Persian monarchy was an absolutist tyranny bent on enslaving the known world.
• Even though hopelessly outnumbered, the Greeks refused to give up their freedom and submit.
  • The Spartans threw the Persian ambassadors down a well.
4. The Story They Told (continued)

- Through a combination of brilliant strategy and incredible heroism, the Greeks broke the advancing wave of Persian conquest and saved the rest of the western world.
• Following their defeat, the Persians lapsed into luxury, decadence, and weakness.

• The common people were crushed by taxation, government was poisoned with intrigue, and their only reliable troops became Greek mercenaries.
When a coalition of Greek states led by Alexander invaded Persia, they faced enormous armies poorly led by a cowardly king, and they swept the rotten façade of the empire away.

The End
5. The Other Sources

- Babylonian and Egyptian chronicles and temple records
- The Hebrew Bible
- Legal and banking records
- Persian monumental inscriptions
- Iranian and Zoroastrian oral traditions
- The Persepolis archives
Other Sources: Chronicles and Temple Records

- Greeks claim Cambyses II, the son of Cyrus the Great, slaughtered the sacred Apis Bull in Egypt, an act of religious desecration and persecution.
  - Egyptian chronicles show the opposite—that the Apis Bull passed away naturally and that Cambyses mourned and honored its passing.

- Greeks claim Artaxerxes III was assassinated by a scheming eunuch named Bagoas.
  - The surviving Babylonian chronicles have him passing away of natural causes.
Other Sources: The Hebrew Bible

- Several books, written during and shortly after the fall of the empire, present a view of Achaemenid Persia contradictory to the Greek portrayal.
- Example: Book of Esther (More on this in Week 3)
• The Greeks claim over-taxation by the Persian monarchy toward the end of the kingdom sucked money from the economy, bankrupted small farmers, driving them from the land, and destroyed the land-owning “yeoman” class.

• The records of banks in Babylonia show no evidence of a shortage of currency, increased foreclosures, or greater concentration of land in the hands of the wealthy.
Other Sources: Legal records

• The Greeks claim Persian women were sequestered from society in “harems” and not allowed to show themselves in public.

• Persian and Babylonia legal documents show many examples of women owning property, engaging in commerce, managing businesses, travelling to tend to their business affairs, and hosting large banquets on their own.

• Divorce records show court-mandated payments of alimony and child support to women by their former husbands, over and above return of their dowry.
Other Sources: Inscriptions and Oral Traditions

• We’ll talk about those in Week 3.
In 1933, Ernst Herzfeld of the Oriental Institute (University of Chicago) discovered a cache of over 30,000 clay tablets and fragments of tablets in the ruins of Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of Achaemenid Persia. Most were in the area known as The Fortification, with a smaller number found in The Treasury.
• Sun-baked clay tablets recording financial transactions, mostly payment by the treasury to cover salary to officials, government travel, and payments for large numbers of construction projects.

• Sample:
  • “2 BAR of figs, supplied by Sutena, was taken to Persepolis for the royal stores. Bakabada and Nababa received it. 21st year.”
• Would never have survived two thousand years except for Alexander’s destruction of Persepolis by fire.
  • The heat of the fire hardened the tablets further.
  • The collapse of building material on the archives sealed them against the elements until archaeologists discovered them
• Since then they have been slowly catalogued, photographed, and translated at the Oriental Institute in Chicago.
Other Sources
The Persepolis Archives (continued)

• The routine nature of the records meant translation and publication was not a high priority. Their importance was only realized when a sufficient number were translated so that clear patterns could be detected.

• In 1969 Richard Hallock of the Oriental Institute published *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, with translations of over 2,000 intact (or mostly so) tablets. The revelations began a renaissance of Achaemenid studies from the 1970s to the present.

• Now they have changed our thinking about the Achaemenid Persian Empire.
6. The Story They Told

• The Achaemenid Persian empire was a peaceful, prosperous, and stable political union for the two hundred and twenty years of its existence.

• After the first surge of military campaigns established the outer boundaries, Achaemenid Persia ceased being an expansionist power.

• There is little or no evidence of economic, political, military, or moral “decadence” in the Achaemenid Persian empire.

• In their approach to religion, science, acceptance of different cultures, and the role of women in society, the Achaemenid Persians were much closer to modern western civilization than were the Greeks.
7. Why You’ve Never Heard This Before

- The Persepolis archives have been available less than ninety years, and significant portions of them have only been catalogued and translated for the last fifty years.

- Greek and Latin literature has been available and studied for centuries. Those stories took root in our imaginations.

- It’s easier to read Greek or Latin than decipher Cuneiform tablets.

- It’s more interesting to read exciting prose narratives than sift through records of financial and legal transactions.

- The original story has become embedded in our self-image, to the point of becoming a political/cultural cause. Some now have an ideological interest in maintaining the original popular narrative.
Next Week: (Week 2) Meet the Greeks!

Who they were and why we should care.