

Iranshenasi

A JOURNAL OF IRANIAN STUDIES

New Series

Book Review by:

Farhad Mafie

Abstracts of Persian Articles by:

Zhaleh Amuzegar

Mehri Bagheri

Hassan Lahouti

Vol. XXII, No. 1, Spring 2010

Book Review

Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War

by Dr. Kaveh Farrokh,

Hardback; April 2007; 320 pages; ISBN: 9781846031083;

Osprey Publishing; \$29.95.

Reviewed by Farhad Mafie

Many of the ancient Persia studies have been influenced, directly or indirectly, by ideas such as the paradigm presented by the great German historian and archeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) that "all civilization started in Greece." In one of his formative essays, he claims, "The only way for us to become great or even inimitable, if possible, is to imitate the Greeks." Thus in many cases the study of ancient Persia has been overshadowed by Greek as well as by Roman history.

Fortunately, more and more first- and second-generation Iranian scholars, archeologists, and researchers living in the West have shown a great interest in studying, documenting, and analyzing ancient Persia. The 1979 Islamic revolution of Iran and the continued migration (or escape) of thousands of the best-educated Iranians to the West has also significantly contributed to the establishment of many Iranian study centers in major universities around the globe and has further facilitated some serious scholarly works on Iran's pre-Islamic eras, in spite of the lack of financial support and many other limitations.

One of the better examples of these scholarly endeavors, by a second-generation Iranian, is Dr. Kaveh Farrokh's work on the Persian Empires' wars.

In his Foreword, "The Mighty Persian Warriors," to Dr. Kaveh Farrokh's *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War*, Harvard Professor Emeritus Richard Nelson Frye, recognized as one of the world's premier scholars of Iranian Studies, with well over 40 years of research, publications, and textbooks, has very correctly stated: "Dr. Kaveh Farrokh has given us the Persian side of the picture as opposed to the Greek and Roman viewpoint, which has long dominated our understanding of these wars. It is refreshing to see the other perspective, and Dr. Farrokh sheds light on many Persian institutions in this history..."

One cannot be more in agreement with Professor Frye, since more people know about Alexander the Great's conquest of Achaemenid Persia (333-330 BC) than the significant military successes of the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanian Empires, along with their revolutionary military technologies, warfare strategies, innovative tactics, and advanced culture and civilizations.

Furthermore, even though the generosity of Cyrus the Great in liberating about 40,000 (p. 45) Jews from Babylonian captivity is very well reflected in the book of Isaiah, where he is cited as "Yahweh's anointed," many people don't know about the significance of Cyrus the Great in world history for establishing the first multi-ethnic Empire, a system that after 2,500 years has left a legacy that is still very much reflected in modern Iran, where Iranian Kurds, Baluchis, Gilanis, Azerbaijanis, Qashqais, Turkmen, and Arabs in Khuzistan have been able to manage living in harmony and peace for over 25 centuries, regardless of challenges with central governments, outside attacks, or problems with foreign destabilizing influences. In the Old Testament, Isaiah hails Koroesh (the Hebrew name for Cyrus) as a Messiah: "He is my Shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose." Obviously, this is an unprecedented noble recognition for a Persian king!

Farrokh has taken an interesting approach in presenting this scholarly volume. Even though the book obviously focuses on the history of warfare and armaments during the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanian Empires, Farrokh meticulously analyzes the cultural, political, and religious aspects of each period, and he shows how they are all interwoven and how they have impacted each war and its aftermath.

Throughout the history of the world, innovation and development of new technology and its practical usage have mostly been driven by the great powers as a means to provide them with the required tools to win wars and to meet their overall political and strategic objectives. Farrokh carefully shows how this notion was very much true during the three Persian Empires and how during each period new technologies, new

tools, new armaments, and new techniques were developed, modified, or enhanced by the ruling Empire to give the Persian army the required edge to win wars, expand their territory, and maintain their sovereignty. The book's detailed and colorful maps clearly show the size of the Persian Empires, indicating that those enormous territories were not captured by small numbers of troops with primitive apparatus. For example, the crossing of Xerxes' army of around 120,000 troops from Asia to Europe was achieved by building a gigantic bridge across the Hellespont. The structure was actually two massive floating bridges composed of 670 ships tied together by ropes (p. 78). This was an enormous military engineering task that required detailed planning, creative design, and perfect execution in order to move thousands of troops, armaments, supplies, and their supporting infrastructure safely and successfully over the water. Farrokh scrupulously provides detailed information on war planning, tactics, engineering, and armament used by the Persian armies for about a millennium in their efforts to add new territories in various wars. Simultaneously, Persian art, medicine, religion, science, governorship, etc., were disseminated and very much emulated by the greatest cultures of the same era, such as the Greeks, Romans, Indians, and Chinese.

In this volume, Farrokh tries to create a balance between traditional historical sources (e.g., Herodotus) and the newly emerging archaeological evidence; however, the absence of Persian sources in many cases is very obvious. To his credit, while he shows the glories of the Persian Empires, he makes objective assessments of the events and their consequences, again based on the historical evidence. For example, after Xerxes' troops stormed the Acropolis, his army then looted and torched Athens. Farrokh correctly states that militarily, this action served no purpose other than to harden the Greek determination to resist the imperial invasion (p. 80).

Many Arab historians have claimed that Persia, on the verge of the Arab invasion of 7th century, was a society in decline and thus embraced the invading Arab armies with open arms. In Chapter 18, Farrokh describes the downfall of the Sassanians and the Islamic conquest, where he shows not only that the collapse of the Sassanians was not a quick victory for the Arabs but, to the contrary, that Iranians fought long and hard against the invading Arabs. He also shows that many other internal elements played a significant role in that defeat. This view, furthermore, holds that once the Persian armies were defeated, the Persians began engaging in an extensive cultural war of resistance, and they succeeded in forcing their own ways on the victorious Arabs. Additionally, by keeping their own language, they were able to continue differentiating

themselves from the Arabs, which is a great example of their successful cultural war of resistance.

Even if one doesn't have the time to read this wonderful and informative book in its entirety, I believe Chapter 19 ("The legacy of Persia after the Islamic conquest") must be read, especially by all young Iranians interested in learning about Sassanians' and Iran's impact throughout history upon civilizations around the world. In this chapter Farrokh illustrates Sassanians' contributions to the world, contributions to culture, technology, art, fabrics, architecture, music, mathematics, science, engineering, religion, and medicine.

He also shows that after the Arab conquest, much of the surviving Sassanian Dynasty and many other Iranian citizens fled to other regions such as China and Central Asia. Many examples of art that serve to illustrate the depth of Irano-Chinese synthesis from the post-Sassanian eras include Tang depictions of ladies engaged in the game of polo (introduced to China by the Sassanians), vases, and the *Tse-Niao* (bird) mural painting found in Kizil, SinKiang (6th-7th century AD). There are also numerous examples of Sassanian influence on Japanese art, such as 8th century Japanese textiles from Nara, which depict hunters on horseback killing lions with the Parthian shot. As Farrokh has correctly noted, "a thorough tabulation of all examples of Iranian influence is not possible..." I also believe that Chapter 19 could be expanded to a separate volume with far more details, pictures, and historical evidence.

Osprey Publishing, which specializes in military history, has done a fine job of producing *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War*. Farrokh's tasteful selections of color and black-and-white pictures, paintings, and maps, with detailed explanations, have significantly enhanced the readers' understanding and appreciation of over a millennium of pre-Islamic Iranian history. I think the book could use more detailed maps throughout the chapters to further illustrate the movements of the armies, locations of major battles, and their corresponding timelines. The book contains a very useful chronology and a comprehensive bibliography of both primary and secondary sources, which help the reader to find the desired relevant references much faster. In addition to a comprehensive index, Farrokh provides an excellent Endnotes section that offers further explanations, references, and relevant information on various key points in each chapter. A great help to students!

I highly recommend this wonderful book to anyone who is interested in learning about pre-Islamic Iranian history (i.e., the Persian Empires) and how the legacy of the Persian Empires continues in today's world. Many historians in major universities such as Dr. Patrick Hunt at

Stanford University have selected this outstanding volume as a text for a course entitled Archaeology and Art of Persia. I am sure more and more universities and colleges will be adopting Farrokh's book once they have the opportunity to read and examine this informative volume for themselves.

Finally, this book is not limited to textbook use or to scholarly studies. Everyone who is interested in world history will surely enjoy this volume. And needless to say, anyone of Iranian descent will be fascinated with the stories and magnificent pictures. What a precious gift! A great coffee table discussion piece!

Dr. Kaveh Farrokh was born in Athens, Greece. He is an Iranian whose ancestral background is from the Caucasus (Georgian-Ossetian and Azarbaijani roots). He received his Ph.D. in 2001 from the University of British Columbia, where he specialized in the cognitive and linguistic processes of Persian speakers. *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War* received the "Best History Book of 2008 Award" in the London WAALM® (the World Academy of Arts, Literature, and Media) ceremonies in November 2008. It has also been selected as among the top three history books of 2008 by the Independent Book Publishers Association of the United States. Dr. Farrokh is also the author of *Elite Sassanian Cavalry: 226-651 AD* (England: Osprey Elite Series 110, Osprey Publishing, 2005).

ایران‌شناسی

ویژه پژوهش در تاریخ و تمدن و فرهنگ ایران و زبان و ادبیات فارسی

دوره جدید

با آثاری از:

اشکان آویشن

شکوفه تقی

رضا صابری

فرهاد مافی

بیژن نامور

احسان یارشاطر

ژاله آموزگار

مهری باقری

نسرین شکیبی ممتاز

حسن لاهوتی

جلال متینی

نقیب نقوی