



Rain Taxi Review of Books

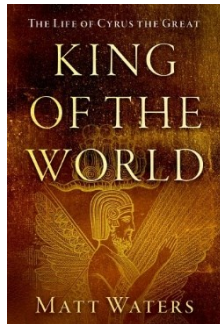
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THE RETURN OF CYRUS

Feature Book Review

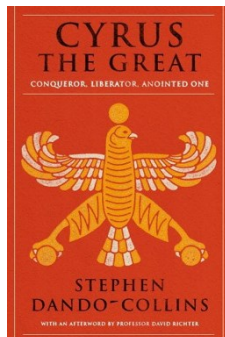
by Rasoul Sorkhabi



King of the World: The Life of Cyrus the Great

Matt Waters

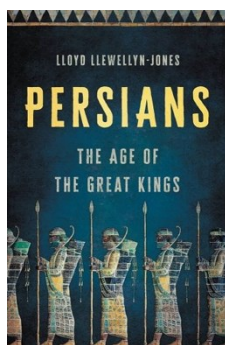
Oxford University Press (\$27.95)



Cyrus the Great: Conqueror, Liberator, Anointed One

Stephen Dando-Collins

Turner Publishing (\$27.99)



Persians: The Age of the Great Kings

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones

Basic Books (\$35)

On a recent trip to California, I visited an exhibition at the Getty Villa Museum titled “Persia: Ancient Iran and the Classical World.” As I marveled at artifacts from a bygone age, I wondered why antiquity fascinates us. For one thing, there is romance in history—when we encounter distant lands and times, we are compelled to contemplate how other peoples lived and worked, how they managed their economies and governance, what they believed and taught to their children, and so forth. Moreover, the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern region is the root of Western civilization. The Persian Empire of 550-330 BC was the world’s earliest empire, operating for over two centuries on a vast scale—from the Nile valley and Anatolia (Asia Minor) on the west through the main Iranian plateau to the Indus valley and central Asia on the east.

As it turns out, three recent books offer a wealth of information about this ancient empire and its founder, Cyrus the Great. There are not many sources to piece together the biography of a man who lived 2,500 years ago, but historians have done an amazing detective job with extant records, including several ancient Greek books—notably, *Historia* by Herodotus (“father of history”), *Persica* by Ctesias (a Greek physician at the Persian court), and *Cyropaedia* (“education of Cyrus”) by Xenophon—as well as a number of cuneiform inscriptions and clay tablets in Mesopotamia (today’s Iraq) and Persia (Iran), all found in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The narratives of Cyrus the Great in Matt Waters’s *King of the World* and Stephen Dando-Collins’s *Cyrus the Great* understandably overlap in content. Both books also use a non-technical language; nevertheless, they show significant differences in style and depth. In *King of the World*, Waters, a professor of ancient history at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, discusses how Cyrus rose from a young prince of a small city state (Anshan in southwest Iran) to overrun the Median empire in northern Iran in 550 BC, the Lydian empire in Anatolia in 547 BC, and finally, Babylon in 539 BC. *King of the World* is a handbook on all things Cyrusian, with scholarly end notes, a comprehensive bibliography, and thirty-nine illustrations dispersed throughout the book.

By contrast, prolific writer Dando-Collins in *Cyrus the Great* takes a more journalistic tack; he gives, in twenty-one brief chapters, a sweeping account of the life and political career of Cyrus, emphasizing how Cyrus became many things to many people, including “founder” of the Persian Empire and “liberator” for the Babylonians and the Jews captive in Babylon. We learn that Cyrus’s name is mentioned nineteen times in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), and he is the only non-Jewish man of antiquity referred to as God-sent Shepherd or Anointed One (Ezra, 45:1-2).

In 1879, during excavation of a great temple in Mesopotamia, a barrel-shaped cylinder of baked clay with Babylonian inscription was uncovered. Named the Cyrus Cylinder, it is now preserved at British Museum in London. The inscription is a proclamation by Cyrus as to how he entered Babylon peacefully, brought justice and liberty to the people, and restored temples and religious freedom. A readable translation of the Cyrus Cylinder is given in *King of the World*. Indeed, the title of Waters’ book comes from the first line of Cyrus’s declaration: “I am Cyrus, King of the World, Great King.”

Broader in purview, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones’s *Persians: The Age of the Great Kings* recounts the birth, growth, and fall of the Persian empire under the Achaemenid dynasty. Like Waters, Llewellyn-Jones is a prominent scholar of ancient Persia, though on the other side of the Atlantic; he teaches at Cardiff University, Wales, and directs the Ancient Iran Program of the British Institute of Persian Studies in London.

Llewelyn-Jones has distilled a great deal of recent research on the Persian empire into captivating prose. After Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Pantheon, 1978), many scholars tried to re-narrate histories of Eastern civilizations through fresh eyes. Llewelyn-Jones has done this for ancient Persia, drawing on some Greco-Roman documents, but also on Iranian inscriptions, arts, and archeology. The author acknowledges that the great kings of the Persian empire, like other empire builders, accomplished their feats through imperial ambitions and military conquests. Nevertheless, he argues that we should not fall into the Greco-Roman cliché of the Persian kings as "lustful, capricious, mad tyrants." In fact, the Persian empire respected pluralism, and the kings did not impose the Persian language, religion, architecture, and customs on the peoples of their empire (as the Romans did, for instance). Persian palaces were decorated by artworks commissioned to artists of various ethnicities, and thirty different ethnic peoples lived under what Llewelyn-Jones calls *Pax Persica*. The Achaemenid Persian empire designed an efficient governance based on "provincial administration" introduced "the first use of coinage," built "first-rate roads," the most important being the Royal Road which ran for 2400 km from Susa in Persia to Sardis in Lydia, and created "the earliest forms of the Pony Express." The empire was conquered in 330 BC by Alexander the Great, who paid respect to Cyrus the Great by visiting his tomb twice—although, as Llewelyn-Jones remarks, Alexander did not live to enjoy the rewards of his world conquest, as he died in Babylon on his way back to Greece at age thirty-two.

As we go back in time with books such as these, words from ancient languages gain our curious attention. At the end of *Persians: The Age of the Great Kings*, Llewellyn-Jones explains the Old Persian pronunciation and meaning of the names in his narrative that may now sound strange and meaningless. For example, Achaemenes means "a person with a friendly mind"; Cyrus means "humiliator of the enemy"; Darius means "holding firm the good." While some of these ancient Persian names are rare now and some persist in modern Western usage, all of them stand for living, breathing connections to our roots.