

## *The Politics of Revenge and the Destruction of Sacred Sites*

*by Dr R. James Ferguson*<sup>1</sup>

The burning, pillage, destruction or profanation of religious sites was a major theme in ancient conflicts, whether the reported violation of the temple of Athena at Troy in the *Iliad*, the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem by invaders (Babylonians and then Roman), or the defacing of divine images by later iconoclastic Christian and Muslim populations. In the modern period, the attack on the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem helped lead to the formation of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1969 (now the Organization for Islamic Cooperation), while tensions between Hindu and Islamic communities in India were intensified by disputes over the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya. Attacks on religious sites continued in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whether the giant Buddhist statues largely destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan or Christian and Shia shrines being demolished by Islamic State (IS) in northern Iraq.<sup>2</sup> These actions were not just attacks on buildings or objects, but an effort to control, damage or erase the history and identity of their related communities. Nonetheless, we should not type-caste these complex events into a simple encounter between the good and the bad, the aggressor and defender.<sup>3</sup> Rather, these accounts are often linked to deeper grand narratives of revenge, retribution, divine nemesis, and cultural identity.<sup>4</sup> We can see these narratives operating in a circle of thought that linked the destruction of the Acropolis of Athens by the Persians (480 BCE) with the burning of Persepolis (330 BCE).

After the defeat by the Persians of the defenders of the Acropolis at Athens in 480 BCE, some Greeks sought refuge in the Temple of Athena Polias but were slaughtered when the Persians burst in. The (earlier) shrine of Erechtheus the

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Ferguson is Director of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*, Bond University, Queensland, Australia, and Assist. Prof. of International Relations. This article is part of the *Journey to the West* series, exploring the interactions of cultural and political systems across Europe, the Middle East and Asia, with a view towards exploring the deep foundations of ‘Western’ thought and institutions.

<sup>2</sup> See Shaheen, Kareem “Isis Destroys Historic Christian and Muslim Shrines in Northern Iraq,” *The Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2015 [<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/20/isis-destroys-historic-christian-muslim-shrines-iraq>]. For the prospects of the necessary interfaith dialogue between Islam and Buddhism, see Selim, Mohammed “The Promises and Prospects of Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue,” *Journal of Oriental Studies*, Vol. 21, 2011, pp178-188 [[http://www.iop.or.jp/Documents/1121/Journal21\\_M.Selim.pdf](http://www.iop.or.jp/Documents/1121/Journal21_M.Selim.pdf)].

<sup>3</sup> For the dangers of orientalism and stereotyping in such accounts, see Kousser, Rachel “Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis,” *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91 no 3, September 2009, pp264-265.

<sup>4</sup> See further Ferguson, R. James “Great Traditions and Grand Narrative,” *The Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*, Vol. 10 no 2, October-December 2013, pp15-40 [<http://www.international-relations.com/CM2013/3-Grand-Narratives.pdf>].

Earthborn and the sacred olive tree there were burnt, though the tree reputedly took shoot again the next day.<sup>5</sup> The burning of the Acropolis would have damaged several shrines other than that of Erechtheus - Thucydides states that on the Acropolis stood the sanctuaries of the 'other gods', which would have included a shrine to Athena Nike and the 'Older Parthenon' celebrating the earlier victory against the Persians at Marathon.<sup>6</sup> It is also probable that other ancient temples in Athens aside from the Acropolis, e.g. the temple of Olympian Zeus, of Pythian Apollo, of Earth, and of Dionysus in Limnae were at least looted, and probably destroyed as part of the subsequent sacking of the city.<sup>7</sup> The Acropolis, of course, was not just a sacred site, but also was the citadel of the city and therefore a legitimate military target. However, the spilling of blood within sanctuaries and the thorough destruction of the temple structures and their statues goes beyond straightforward strategic goals.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, according to Herodotus, even the Persians were willing to try to propitiate the Greek gods whose sanctuaries they had disturbed. Xerxes apparently had second thoughts afterwards and ordered Athenian exiles to go up to the Acropolis and offer sacrifice there in the customary way, perhaps due to a vision, or in repentance for the burning of the temple.<sup>9</sup> The Greek perception of one of their arch-enemies engaged the idea that interference with a temple and its suppliants was both an improper and potentially dangerous act.

Generally, the burning of temples, even when done to 'foreign' gods during the extremities of warfare, was viewed as an act which needed special justification.<sup>10</sup> Herodotus states that the Persians claimed a pretext for their burning of Greek temples including the wealthy temple of Apollo at Branchidae (Didyma) near Miletus,<sup>11</sup> the

---

<sup>5</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. by A. Godley, London, Heinemann, 1960, VIII.55; Wheeler, Mortimer *Flames Over Persepolis: Turning-Point in History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968, p46.

<sup>6</sup> Thucydides *Thucydides*, 4 vols., trans. Charles Smith, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1964, II.15; Kousser, Rachel "Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91 no 3, September 2009, pp264-265.

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides II.15.

<sup>8</sup> Kousser, Rachel "Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91 no 3, September 2009, pp265-266.

<sup>9</sup> Herodotus VIII.54. The whole account, of course, needs to be treated with caution since it largely reflects the demands of Greek historiography and its view of the Persians.

<sup>10</sup> For exceptional breaches of norms in Greek conflicts, see Kousser, Rachel "Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91 no 3, September 2009, p274, following Thucydides IV.97; Polybius *The Histories*, Vols. I-VI, London, Heinemann, 1967, V.11-4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Its 'shrine and place of divination was plundered and burnt', Herodotus VI.19. See also a variant tradition in Quintus Curtius Rufus *History of Alexander*, trans. John Yardley, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, VII.5.28; Dandamaev, M.A. *A Political History of The Achaemenid Empire*, trans. W. Vogelsang, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1989, p166. It seems that objects from these temple were found their way into Persia, including a large bronze statue of Apollo from Branchidae, Pausanias *Guide to Greece*, 2 vols., translated by Peter Levi, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979, I.16.3; Strabo *The Geography of Strabo*, 8 vols., trans. by Jones, Horace Leonard, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1964, XIV 1.5 & XVII 1.43; Dandamaev, M.A. *A Political History of The Achaemenid Empire*, trans. W. Vogelsang, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1989, p166.

temple of Apollo in Abae, the destruction of temples at Eretria on Euboea,<sup>12</sup> as well as the plundering and burning of the Acropolis at Athens. One of the few temples left intact by the Persians, and later on apparently unmolested by pirates, was the Sanctuary of Hemithea in the Carian Chersonese.<sup>13</sup> The Persian pretext for the plundering of these temples was the earlier destruction of the temple of Cybele in Sardis, burnt along with much of the city by Greek forces during the Ionian revolt.<sup>14</sup> In this context, it is interesting that during the Persian advance through Thessaly Xerxes showed respect for some local sanctuaries.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, it is probable that the asylum rights granted the temple of Apollo at Didyma were originally based on earlier immunities given by King Darius, who is also reported to have shown respect to the Island of Tenos as the possible birthplace of Apollo and Artemis.<sup>16</sup>

These factors suggest that we must look critically at our sources. It is likely that our Greek sources exaggerate impiety for various dramatic and historical reasons, and that Persian policy in this area was strategically tied to the need to placate or take punitive action against target states.

The temple at Delphi, which Xerxes had apparently planned to plunder according to stories recounted by Herodotus, was apparently able to defend itself through divine intervention, including thunderbolts, rock-falls and the apparitions of two dead local heroes.<sup>17</sup> The account by Herodotus may conceal what was in fact a clever ambush by the Delphians and their supporters, but the recounting of these events is done in Herodotus with little embellishment or irony. Likewise, it is possible that Xerxes chose not to plunder a site sacred not just to his Greek enemies, but to those states in northern Greece which had remained neutral or Medised.<sup>18</sup> Such self-restraint would not find easy representation in Greek accounts which emphasise the justice of the Greek cause, the greed and pride of the Persian invaders, and subsequent assessments of Xerxes as a hubristic leader doomed to failure. In later traditions Xerxes would also be made responsible for motivating the Branchidae (a clan of priestly guardians) to violate the temple of Didymia in Miletus in return for their lives.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Herodotus, VI.32 & VIII.33; Dandamaev, M.A. *A Political History of The Achaemenid Empire*, trans. W. Vogelsang, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1989, p172.

<sup>13</sup> Cook, J.M. & Plommer, W.H. (eds.) *The Sanctuary of Hemithea at Kastabos*, Cambridge, CUP, 1966, p62, pp162-3, following Diodorus V.63. See also Rigsby, Kent J. *Asylia: Territorial Inviolability in the Hellenistic World*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, p6.

<sup>14</sup> Herodotus V.102; Dandamaev, M.A. *A Political History of The Achaemenid Empire*, trans. W. Vogelsang, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1989, p160.

<sup>15</sup> Herodotus VII.197.

<sup>16</sup> Parke, H.W. *The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor*, London, Croom Helm, 1985, pp19-20; Wiegand, Theodor, Rehm, Albert, & Harder, Richard *Didyma*, Berlin, Verlag Gebr. Mann, 1958, II, nos. 15 line 10; 107, line 11; 391 A II, line 9; 487, lines 7-9; 479, lines 39-40. Kent Rigsby argues that *asylia* as such was probably not given by Darius, though other immunities might have been granted, Rigsby, Kent J. *Asylia: Territorial Inviolability in the Hellenistic World*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, pp172-173.

<sup>17</sup> Herodotus VIII.36-39.

<sup>18</sup> See Balcer, J.M. "The Greeks and the Persians: The Process of Acculturation", *Historia*, 32, 1983, pp257-67.

<sup>19</sup> Curtius VII.5.28, an account not supported by Herodotus VI.19.

Later on Arrian recounted Alexander the Great's excuse for his burning of Persepolis, citing as a cause the Persian invasion of Greece and 'retribution for the destruction of Athens, the burning of temples, and all the other crimes they had committed against the Greeks.'<sup>20</sup> This theme of revenge for the destruction of Greek temples and cities is reiterated in the accounts of Diodorus and Strabo.<sup>21</sup> If the revenge theme was a 'specious pretext',<sup>22</sup> the pretext was nonetheless of considerable importance.

The Persian treatment of Athens was not just a casual burning out of enemy soldiers who were trying to hold the acropolis behind their 'wooden wall.' Archaeological research has recovered archaic religious statuary which had been intentionally damaged by the Persians during their occupation: a few were left on display, others were buried and some stored as a cache in a protective hollow by the Athenians themselves.<sup>23</sup> Other stones were later on carefully reused or reshaped for rebuilding sections of Acropolis walls. The Persians had clearly aimed to wipe out Athens as a major centre of resistance: this was a symbolic as well as a physical goal. The initial evacuation of most of the population of the city, plus the earlier discussion of a plan to migrate to the West, indicates that the Persian invasion had threatened the very survival of Athens. The impact of such a threat would not be forgotten even after many generations.

The eventual defeat of the Persians in mainland Greece was seen as partly due to their sacrilegious destruction of temples, and the willingness of Xerxes to be influenced against his better judgement by a dream, presumably sent by the gods to force him into a destructive war which allowed fate to be revealed.<sup>24</sup> It was these types of considerations which made Xerxes an ideal person to be chosen as a prime example of Asian despotism and excessive pride in Aeschylus' play *The Persians*.<sup>25</sup> It was his hubris in attacking Greece, most of all, which set him against the limits appointed by the gods.<sup>26</sup> Herodotus noted that the Persians had attacked and plundered many

---

<sup>20</sup> Arrian *Anabasis Alexandri* and *Indica*, trans. P.A. Brunt, 2 vols., Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989, III.18.12. Also emphasised in the rather rhetorical themes suggested for Alexander's pre-battle speech at Issus, Curtius III.10.9. See also Curtius V.6.1 V.7.3. Arrian, ironically, goes on to note that Alexander did not show good sense in this policy, *ibid.* For formal revenge as a pretext for the invasion initially launched by Philip II, see Fredricksmeyer, E.A. "On the Final Aims of Philip II", in Adams, W. Lindsay & Borza, Eugene N. (eds.) *Philip II, Alexander the Great and the Macedonian Heritage*, Lanham, University Press of America, 1982, pp90-91.

<sup>21</sup> Strabo XV.3.6; Diodorus XVI.89.2, XVII.4.9 & XVII.70-72.

<sup>22</sup> As noted in Bosworth, A.B. *Alexander and the East: The Tragedy of Triumph*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1996, p1. See further below.

<sup>23</sup> Kousser, Rachel "Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91 no 3, September 2009, pp270-272; Burn, Andrew Robert *Persian and the Greeks: The Defence of the West, c. 546-478 B.C.*, London, Edward Arnold Ltd., 1962, pp434-5.

<sup>24</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Hugh *The Justice of Zeus*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971, pp60-3.

<sup>25</sup> See Aeschylus *The Persians* 800-837 where the speech of the ghost of Darius underlines the rashness of the invasion, and specifically mentions the sacrilegious destruction of temples, altars, and the statues of gods.

<sup>26</sup> Aeschylus *The Persians* 176-214, 511-835; Lloyd-Jones, Hugh *The Justice of Zeus*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971, pp88-9.

temples, including those at Memphis (in Egypt), Didyma, Eretria, Abae and Potidaea.<sup>27</sup> Herodotus is also willing to lay specific blame on particular Persian troops whose impiety led to their unlucky deaths. Potidaea, for example, revolted soon after the Persian defeat at Salamis, and suffered a siege by Persian land forces. The Persians attempted to cross into the city from the seaward side during a low tide, but were caught in a surprising high-tide while only two-fifths of the way across. Many of the Persians were drowned, others killed by the Potidaeans. Herodotus then explains that these men had in fact been guilty of profaning the temple and image of Poseidon in the city, and this caused their destruction.<sup>28</sup>

There was continuity in anti-Persian sentiment after their armies had been pushed out of Europe. The destroyed temples on the Acropolis and in Attica were not immediately rebuilt, partly for financial reasons, but also as an effective propaganda reminder of the destruction the Persians had committed. The Greeks had apparently sworn ‘not to rebuilt these sorry memorials’,<sup>29</sup> at least until the Persians were completely defeated in Europe, the Aegean and in Ionia. Likewise, certain archaic sculptures, partly destroyed and blackened by the fire, survived on the Acropolis down into Roman times, though some had been carried away by the Persians as spoils, while other Greek temple sites were observed by later travellers such as Pausanias to have been damaged during the Persian invasion.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the long delay in rebuilding the Acropolis, along with the continued ritual use of the ruins for three decades, would have imprinted itself on the entire Athenian population.<sup>31</sup>

Barbarians and Persians were also excluded from the ceremonies at Eleusis, apparently due to their profanation of Greek temples, though it was equally likely that they could have been excluded on formal ethnic grounds. Without a knowledge of Greek language, they would in any case have been unable to understand the sacred stories and formula that attended the mystery.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, it was supposedly the Persians and those of the Persian *epigone*, literally Persian descendants, but in fact

<sup>27</sup> See Kousser, Rachel “Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis,” *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91 no 3, September 2009, p274.

<sup>28</sup> Herodotus VIII.129.

<sup>29</sup> Wheeler, Mortimer *Flames Over Persepolis: Turning-Point in History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968, p46.

<sup>30</sup> Pausanias I.1.5, I.8.5, & I.27.7.

<sup>31</sup> The problematic and perhaps inaccurate ‘Oath of Plataia’ of 479 BCE, as recorded by Lykourgos (an Athenian orator), suggested that the Greek allies as a whole bound themselves not to rebuild ‘all the temples burned and thrown down’ in order to serve as a memorial ‘for future generations of the impiety of the barbarians.’ See Kousser, Rachel “Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis,” *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91 no 3, September 2009, pp269-270, discussing *Against Leokrates* 81).

<sup>32</sup> Mylonas, George E. *Eleusis and the Eleusian Mysteries*, Princeton N.Y., Princeton University Press, 1974, p248; Dillon, Matthew *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Ancient Greece*, London, Routledge, 1997, p62, p164. The Delphic oracle could be consulted by non-Greeks, but the questions had to be stated in Greek, *ibid.*, p165.

comprising a much wider status group, who would be one of the few groups for whom asylum rights were denied in Egyptian temples of the Ptolemaic age.<sup>33</sup>

Such visible examples of profanation were politically useful for Athens in building up and maintaining the naval power of the Delian League, which Athens would go on to mould into the Athenian Empire. It was the threat of the Persians, and the desire of revenge against them,<sup>34</sup> which could readily justify such the creation of the League distinguish it from a more straightforward Athenian hegemony. Indeed, it was not an accident that Athens would seriously begin to rebuild the Acropolis temples only some thirty years later, circa 450-447 BCE, a few years after Pericles had moved the treasury of the Delian League (in 454 BCE) from the island of Delos.<sup>35</sup> Work on some restored temples in Athens would continue into the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Sculptured elements from the new Parthenon reflected not only the profound victory against Persian forces but also the Greek suffering required to achieve such a turn around.<sup>36</sup>

The threat of Persia, likewise, would remain alive in Greek mentality during the Peloponnesian War and down through the 4th century BCE, with the satraps of Asia Minor and the Persian Kings influencing Greek affairs, mainly through diplomatic and financial means.<sup>37</sup> It is in this context that we can see the political relevance for repeated calls, often partisan in relation to the changing power-balance among various city-states and the *status quo*, for a 'pan-Hellenic crusade against Persia' made as early as Pericles' Congress Decree,<sup>38</sup> and made again by Gorgias in 408 BCE, Lysias in 384, by Isocrates in 380 and again in 346 in his *Address to Philip*.<sup>39</sup> Philip II's proposal of such a campaign, specifically on the basis of punishing the Persians for their earlier profanation of Greek temples, was apparently quite popular and won him some support from the Greek cities. This helped facilitate the declaration of war against Persia by the League of Corinth.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, it is clear that during the initial phases of his eastern invasion, Alexander was willing to present it as a 'Panhellenic

---

<sup>33</sup> The status-designation, however, soon came to used by other groups for complex economic motives, see Oates, J.F. "The Status Designation Περσηη τηη επιγονηη", *Yale Classical Studies*, 18, 1963, pp60-63, p109; Fuks, A. & Tcherikover, V.A. M. (eds.) *Corpus Papyorum Judaicarum*, I, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1957, pp13-14; Woess, Frederich von *Das Asylwesen Ägyptens in der Ptolemäerzeit und die spätere Entwicklung*, München, C.H. Beck'sche, 1923, pp62-72.

<sup>34</sup> See also Plutarch *Pericles* 17.

<sup>35</sup> Wheeler, Mortimer *Flames Over Persepolis: Turning-Point in History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968, p47; Kousser, Rachel "Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91 no 3, September 2009, p269.

<sup>36</sup> Kousser, Rachel "Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91 no 3, September 2009, pp263-282.

<sup>37</sup> Themes examined in detail in Lewis, D.M. *Sparta and Persia*, Leiden, Brill, 1977; Ryder, T.T.B. *Koine Eirene: General Peace and Local Independence in Ancient Greece*, London, Oxford University Press, 1965.

<sup>38</sup> Plutarch *Pericles* 17; Green, Peter *Alexander of Macedon, 356-323 B.C.*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, p522 footnote 45.

<sup>39</sup> Isocrates *Panegyricus* 138-162; Isocrates *To Philip* 16; Perlman, S. "Isocrates' 'Philippus' and Panhellenism", *Historia*, 18, 1969, pp370-4; Green, Peter *Alexander of Macedon, 356-323 B.C.*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, pp47-8.

<sup>40</sup> Diodorus XVI.89.2; Cawkwell, George *Philip of Macedon*, London, Faber & Faber, 1978, pp170-171.

war of revenge'.<sup>41</sup> W.W. Tarn argues that Alexander would certainly have read and been influenced by Isocrates' *To Philip*<sup>42</sup>: Alexander would have known the contents of this 'open letter' (written in 346 BCE) since it had a direct bearing on Macedonian policy in relation to Athens and the other Greek states.

These calls for revenge and a pan-Hellenic crusade do have direct political motives, but this does not exhaust their meaning. We should not be too hasty in imposing our own brand of pragmatism on the past. For example, the rituals of initiation at Eleusis also involved purification,<sup>43</sup> something that the Athenians would seek to deny their Persian enemies, since this might save them from the negative consequences of their 'unholy acts'. Though most of these claims developed alongside political considerations, they do form part of the notions of reciprocal and retributive justice which were common in inter-state affairs in the ancient Greek world, and which are important aspects of Herodotus' work.<sup>44</sup>

The destruction of temples, though a possibility during the pillage of a city, was not proper without special justification. Nemesis, therefore, would fall upon the Persians for their actions, and Alexander, seeing himself as a providential agent in world affairs, may have regarded the burning of Persepolis<sup>45</sup> as a suitable re-action politically and religiously. By its very name (*Perse-polis*), this site was regarded by the Greeks as the Persian city *par excellence*. Though the exact function of Persepolis has been debated, it was certainly a huge ritual complex that had some role in reflecting the glory of Persian kingship. It was also a site which accumulated the tribute and wealth of empire. Evidence from Persepolis indicates that a number of foreign religious items, including figures of the gods Bes and Isis, plus a range of valuable objects such as ivories and alabaster vases, some of a votive nature, found their way there.<sup>46</sup> Diodorus also suggests that Cambyses robbed 'gold, silver, and

<sup>41</sup> Tarn, W. W. *Alexander the Great, Volume I*, Cambridge, CUP, 1979, p8; Edmunds, Lowell "The Religiosity of Alexander", *GRBS*, 12, 1971, p364; Brunt, P.A. "The Aims of Alexander", *Greece & Rome*, 12, 1965, p205. Some of the emblems on Alexander's early gold coinage, specifically the 'snake, griffin and sphinx', associated with the cult of Athena, may have been deemed suitable since Athena, 'the goddess of wisdom and bringer of victory and freedom, was a natural choice for a coinage designed to provide finance for a military expedition to free the Greeks of Asia Minor', Price, Martin Jessop *The Coinage in the Name of Alexander the Great and Philip Arrhidaeus: A British Museum Catalogue*, London, British Museum Press, 1991, vol. I, p29.

<sup>42</sup> Tarn, W. W. *Alexander the Great, Volume I*, Cambridge, CUP, 1979, p9.

<sup>43</sup> Mylonas, George E. *Eleusis and the Eleusian Mysteries*, Princeton N.Y., Princeton University Press, 1974, pp240-1.

<sup>44</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Hugh *The Justice of Zeus*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971, p59.

<sup>45</sup> For an overview of the significance of the Persepolis, see Wilber, Donald N. *Persepolis: The Archaeology of Parsa, Seat of the Persian Kings*, N.Y., Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969; Schmidt, Erich F. *Persepolis*, I-III, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953-1957-1970; Doxuan, Charles-Emmanuel "The Mystery of Persepolis", *UNESCO Courier*, May 1995, pp40-43.

<sup>46</sup> Schmidt, Erich F. *Persepolis*, Vols I-III, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953-1957-1970, Vol. I, pp25, 182, Vol. II, pp68, 81-83; Dandamaev, M.A. *A Political History of The Achaemenid Empire*, trans. W. Vogelsang, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1989, p75.

ivory from the Egyptian temples, and sent craftsmen of Egypt as captives to Persepolis, Susa and Media in order to build his palaces.<sup>47</sup>

It is likely that the heartland of Persia and its religious institutions were reluctant to fall in too wholeheartedly with the plans of Alexander the Great. Destroying Persepolis might have been seen as a way of wiping out one rallying point for such opposition. The sources are divided as to whether the burning was intentional retribution, or done by Alexander's drunk followers who were incited by the courtesan Thais, a companion to the later Ptolemy I.<sup>48</sup> As noted by C. Bradford Welles, 'the burning of the citadel was also a calculated act of symbolism' and 'doubtless many a Thais was present.'<sup>49</sup> Up until this time Alexander had played his role as a revenging hegemon acting on Greek motivations quite effectively: "Spoils were dedicated in the names of 'Alexander and the Greeks'; captured works of art were restored to their Greek owners; and large bounties were given to the allies at the end of their service in 330."<sup>50</sup> Robin Lane Fox rightly argues that there was a strategic reason for the destruction of Persepolis, in that if "Alexander burned the palace deliberately, he did so because he did not wish to leave its splendour for a local Persian revival or for an ambitious governor who could trade on it while Alexander's immediate lines of communication ran elsewhere."<sup>51</sup> However, this was not Alexander's only motive. The burning also confirmed Alexander's pretexts for the expedition, reinforcing his role as a leader of a Hellenic 'crusade' against Persia.<sup>52</sup>

At a later date we find a Seleucid colony, Seleuceia-ad-Tigris, planted in the region, perhaps to undermine the 'power of the Magi' in mobilising local resistance.<sup>53</sup> The absence of coinage suggests that Persepolis was largely abandoned by 300 BCE, while the administrative centre of nearby Istakhr became important in later periods.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Dandamaev, M.A. *A Political History of The Achaemenid Empire*, trans. W. Vogelsang, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1989, p75, following Diodorus of Sicily *Library of History*, 12 vols., trans. by C.H. Oldfather et al., Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1933-1967, I.46.4 and Ctesias *Persica* 13.30 = FGh, Vol. III, pp459-460.

<sup>48</sup> See Plutarch *Life of Alexander* 38; Diodorus XVII.72; Curtius V.7.3-8; Arrian III.19.

<sup>49</sup> Welles, C. Bradford *Alexander and the Hellenistic World*, Toronto, A.M. Hakkert Ltd., 1970, p36, contra the trivialisation of the nemesis theme found in FOX, Robin Lane *The Search for Alexander*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1980, p249. Plutarch records that historians have preserved varied accounts that suggest the burning was either on impulse or an act of policy, Plutarch *Alexander* 38. The Armenian edition of the *Alexander Romance* states that he ordered the burning but soon regretted it, Pseudo-Callisthenes *The Romance of Alexander the Great By Pseudo-Callisthenes: Translated from the Armenian Version*, trans. Albert Wolohojian, N.Y., Columbia University Press, 1969, 192. Intentionality of such acts is argued for directly in Arrian *Anabasis* III.18.12.

<sup>50</sup> Hammond, N.G.L. & Walbank, F.W. *A History of Macedonia: Vol. 3, 336-167 B.C.*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1988, p80, following Arrian *Anabasis* I.16.7, III.16.7-8 & 19.5.

<sup>51</sup> Fox, Robin Lane *The Search for Alexander*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1980, p249. In support of intentional destruction, see Hammond, N.G.L. *The Genius of Alexander the Great*, London, Duckworth, 1997, p115.

<sup>52</sup> Edmunds, Lowell "The Religiosity of Alexander", *GRBS*, 12, 1971, p364.

<sup>53</sup> Cohen, Getzel *The Seleucid Colonies: Studies in Founding, Administration and Organization*, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1978, p88, following Appian *The Syrian Wars* 58.

<sup>54</sup> Grainger, John D. *Seleukos Nikator: Constructing a Hellenistic Kingdom*, London, Routledge, 1990, p149.



It is also significant that during the wars of the Diadoche (the successors of Alexander) Peukestas was distrusted because of his ability to build up a power base centred on Persepolis, his drafting of Persian soldiers, and the loyalty he gained from local Persian noblemen.<sup>55</sup>

Such trends suggest that Alexander had interlinked strategic, propaganda and religious motives for the destruction of Persepolis.<sup>56</sup> At the least, it was a major Persian city which had particular cultural significance as a royal, religious and imperial centre.<sup>57</sup> If the burning was unplanned or inspired by Thais, then it could be held up as an example of Alexander as a ‘victor’ who had not conquered himself and could not control the actions of his followers. This possibility became part of later critical character assessments of Alexander, subthemes found in both Arrian and Quintus Curtius Rufus.<sup>58</sup> Overall, the political context suggests that the destruction was an intentional, strategic and symbolic act.

Later Persian traditions had to struggle with the complex issue of how Alexander had managed to conquer the Achaemenid dynasty, perhaps drawing on Armenian and Syriac translations of the *Alexander Romance*.<sup>59</sup> In these views, Alexander needed to have been a great hero to have succeeded and thereafter a legitimate successor by conquest. In the later Iranian national epic the *Shahnameh* Alexander is portrayed as a having a Persian father, Darius II, while an extremely positive view is found in the medieval *Book of Alexander* by the Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi.<sup>60</sup> Other traditions suggest he was involved in the persecution of Zoroastrian or Magian followers, who had to flee into Drangiana (Sistan in modern eastern Iran).<sup>61</sup>

Long-term, even millennial, effects need to be born in mind when religious and heritage sites become the targets of conflict, whether intentionally or as ‘collateral’ damage due to their strategic locations.<sup>62</sup> The destruction of temples and religious centres has historically been taken as proof of ‘barbarian’ impiety and excessive

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp45-6. See Diodorus XIX.14.4-5.

<sup>56</sup> Contra Ellis, Walter M. *Ptolemy of Egypt*, London, Routledge, 1994, pp8-9.

<sup>57</sup> See further Wilber, Donald N. *Persepolis: The Archaeology of Parsa, Seat of the Persian Kings*, N.Y., Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969

<sup>58</sup> For other critical themes, see Arrian IV.8-14 & VII.29; Curtius VII.12-19.

<sup>59</sup> See Stoneman, Richard et al. (eds) *The Alexander Romance in Persia in the East*, Eelde: Barkhius, 2012; Pseudo-Callisthenes *The Romance of Alexander the Great By Pseudo-Callisthenes: Translated from the Armenian Version*, trans. Albert Wolohojian, N.Y., Columbia University Press, 1969; Stoneman, Richard (trans.) *The Greek Alexander Romance*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1991.

<sup>60</sup> See the translation by H. Wilberforce Clarke Translation of the Ganjavi in “Persian Literature in Translation,” collected by the Packard Humanities Institute. [<http://persian.packhum.org/persian/main?url=pf%3Fauth%3D176%26work%3D002>]; “Iskandar,” in *Shahnama: 1000 Years of the Persian Book of Kings*, Smithsonian’s Museums of Asian Art, 2011 [<http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/shahnama/iskandar.asp>].

<sup>61</sup> *Book of Arda Wiraz* 1-17; *Denkard* 4.14-16, and the Bombay text fragment [[http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander\\_t47.html](http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander_t47.html)]; For a balanced view, see Ansari, Ali “Alexander the Not So Great: History Through Persian Eyes,” *BBC Magazine*, 15 July 2012 [<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18803290>].

violence.<sup>63</sup> Acts of revenge will often be revenged, if not in the short term then in subsequent centuries. Human memory and its legacies are not as easily erased as a building or monument. Even when temples, churches or mosques are rebuilt, inter-communal hatred may take generations to ease or resolve.

---

<sup>62</sup> For the massive damage to historical buildings in Homs (Syria) due to the ongoing civil war, see Taylor, Alan "Syria's City of Homs, Shattered by War," *The Atlantic*, 14 May 2014 [<http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/05/syrias-city-of-homs-shattered-by-war/100735/>]

<sup>63</sup> Kousser, Rachel "Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 91 no 3, September 2009, pp272-273.