If S.’s conclusions repeatedly focus on what changes between the archaic and classical period, he also has important things to say about differences between classes. He insists that the society of the peasant and the society of the nobility were distinct throughout the archaic period (with a diagram on 145). The nobility did not need neighbours as a defence against risk and could be more independent or seek society of their own kind who were not immediately local. They did not have the same pressure on every individual’s labour and so they, as also for opposite reasons the sub-peasant class, had less distinct gender roles. It was thus peasants whose need of each other forged an ordered society that became the basis of the polis, and it is the rules of that peasant society that are to be seen behind the legal codes of the archaic lawgivers, who are seeking to control existing social control not by the nobility but among neighbourhoods of farmers.

As the above summary of S.’s conclusions makes clear, there are few areas of Greek social, political, or economic history about which this book does not challenge us to review and revise our views. He unveils a whole new background against which to see the economic development of the Greek world. The whole question of how the classical period differed from the archaic period is reopened, and current views of both periods are found significantly wanting. Against both those who think that the motor behind change in archaic Greece was the hoplite and those who think it was the aristocracy, he insists on the centrality of the peasant world to the story of legal and political change. He offers new grounds for distinguishing ‘classes’, and develops further than others have done the awareness of the ways in which social and economic conditions impinged upon the lives of women. As I have suggested above, it is not hard to find relevant bodies of evidence which S. simply leaves out of the picture, but his achievement is to show how the very evidence which Greek historians have long used will, when examined with the questions derived from sociology and anthropology in mind, yield a coherent picture which is more sophisticated and persuasive than has been created by approaching these texts armed simply with common sense. It is a pleasure to hail so original a contribution.

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A monograph which focuses on Darius III, the last king of the Achaemenid dynasty, appears at first glance as a perhaps surprising, but challenging, undertaking. After all, information which can be gained about him predominantly from the Greek and Roman secondary sources is notoriously problematic. The immediate question one then asks is whether the subject merits an entire monograph. As Briant reminds us, he had already voiced his intention to undertake this study in 1996 (cf. p. 12), explaining that no book has ever been dedicated to Darius (p. 13). Yet the present study is not intended as a biography of the last Achaemenid king. As we learn in Chapter 2, entitled ‘The Impossible Biography’, the objective of the book is not to restore the image of Darius III, but to understand why and how his image has been constructed over the centuries (p. 129).
In the following chapters (Chaps. 3–9) Briant builds up the argument that the episodes recounted about Darius in the secondary ancient sources are largely literary constructions, using rhetorical and dramatic means in order to convey a certain image of the king ‘who was defeated by Alexander’ (p. 133). He provides detailed analyses of the classical ancient sources, especially of Arrian and Quintus Curtius Rufus, to demonstrate the ‘creation’ of Darius. Focusing on several incidents regarding the Achaemenid king he first of all wants to demonstrate that the ancient historiography is embedded in literary topoi and in exempla, while the use of mimesis further undermines the historicity of the sources. By placing the ancient historians in their historical context, i.e., the Roman empire (Chap. 6), Briant not only wants to emphasise the time gap between Darius’ reign and the actual writings of the Alexander-historians, but also that their writing was embedded in contemporary conditions characterised by Rome’s relationship with the new Persian power, Parthia, as well as in contemporary literary conventions. Yet while it is well worth placing the sources on Alexander in their historical context, it also must be pointed out that the source problem is not only about the Romanisation of Alexander and Darius, since the ancient classical writers were surely drawing on a tradition going back to the (lost) primary sources. Chapter 10 discusses the Arab-Persian tradition on Darius/Dārā and Alexander/Iskander, to arrive at a conclusion about its depiction of Darius as an undistinguished and undervalued figure. This important chapter shows that the mainstream of this tradition depicts Darius as a king through whom Alexander can be presented as the legitimate heir to the Persian throne. The book is intended, then, to show that the classical ancient sources must be regarded as literary works which set out to ‘create’ the figure of Darius, rather than as historical sources, while the Arab-Persian texts have a similar limited historical value.

Briant sets the scene by describing the scant primary Persian evidence which would allow us to ‘find’ Darius in history (the question of his tomb, the lack of a private palace, the problem regarding the coinage which could be ascribed to his reign, and the few Near Eastern sources which include a reference to him). A discussion of modern scholarship in the same chapter observes that it largely followed the sentiments prescribed by the ancient authors. We know that these are two-fold: on the one hand Darius is described as good-looking and courageous, having proved himself in Artaxerxes III’s fight against the Cadusians. On the other he is a symbol of the empire in decline, evidenced in his illegitimate descent, his weakness as a king who twice flees the battlefield in order to escape Alexander’s attack, and who finally, alone and deserted, save for a few courtiers, is shown in all his human despair, suffering the ultimate humiliation at the hands of his courtiers. The first and final encounter between the dying Darius and Alexander marks the transition of power from one king to another.

I highlight here some of the examples Briant discusses in order to demonstrate that the figure of Darius is merely a literary construction. As an important literary motif he identifies the single combat, a topic to which the author returns in the course of the book’s discussion. Pointing out the story of Darius’ bravery in the battle against the Cadusians, Briant wants to see the ‘dual’ in the context of Roman and Gaulic combat descriptions (p. 209) and concludes that this is a deliberate motif designed «pour construire a posteriori une biographie héroïque en faveur du nouveau roi» (p. 209). As he argues further, the single combat is merely a motif used in the Vulgate tradition to highlight Alexander’s courage (p. 318ff). It follows an earlier use of the motif, which can be found in Xenophon’s description of the encounter between Cyrus the Younger and Artaxerxes II (p. 321). Against this view we have at least to consider whether this story contains a kernel of historical
truth, or the possibility that this was, at any rate, part of the contemporary official (Persian) presentation of Darius. Parthian and Sasanian evidence from Tang-e Sarvak, Tang-e Ab, and Naqsh-e Rustam clearly show that the chivalrous combat between two equal opponents was an event which at some point in history entered Persian royal presentation and must have depicted real events. Furthermore, we would need to ask the question why especially Diodorus would have been inspired to invent such a story on the basis of contemporary politics. Even if we apply caution to the reading of Alexander’s encounter with Darius in battle, we would not give sufficient consideration to the sources if we merely reduced it to a literary motif.

Another literary device used to emphasise the weakness of the king can be found in the stories involving the king’s family, especially the women. Darius’ negotiations for the release of his family are to be regarded as a literary means to show a king without leadership skills, for whom the rescue is more important than the fate of his empire (p. 323ff). The diplomatic exchange between Darius and Alexander is to serve just that purpose, but has to be dismissed as literary invention. Yet is this to mean that we ought to discard the historicity of this event altogether? The problem here is to do with the sources as well as the historicity of the event itself. Leaving the source-question aside for the moment, the inclusion of the king’s family in the royal entourage can certainly be regarded as a historical detail. As to the importance of securing the release of members of the royal family, there are several examples recorded for the Parthian and Sasanian periods, when the Persian kings paid ransom to their enemies in order to save the life of captured members of their family. The women’s presence in the king’s entourage, as well as the king’s concern for their safety and his responsibility to secure their release, forms part of the royal ideology and can therefore be regarded as historical reality. It is certainly more than a literary motif.

The royal women themselves, so Briant, are presented in a stereotypical way (Chap. 9). Their description is based more in the realm of literary fiction than historical reality (p. 401). The royal women of Darius III are cast against the type of the cruel and intriguing female as noble and morally well-behaved women (p. 406–407). Alexander’s treatment of the women is set to demonstrate his generosity and restraint, to which they respond with their acceptance of Alexander. These episodes amount to a gradual appropriation of the members of the Achaemenid royal family as his own, culminating in calling Sisygambis his mother. Parallel episodes known from Latin literature are to show that these episodes are anchored in the realm of exempla (p. 417).

Yet while there can be no doubt that the Alexander-historians, especially Curtius Rufus, embellished their history and accordingly have to be read and studied with caution by modern-day historians, are we to deny any historical element in these stories? Alexander’s calling Sisygambis his mother is as much a facet in the process of legitimising his rule in Asia, as is his referring to Ada of Caria as his ‘second mother’ (Plut. Alex. 22.7). As for the stereotyping of women as morally good or morally bad, this is a practice which we may find in Latin literature, but which follows a long established convention which we trace back to Greek historiography, beginning with Herodotus, where Persian royal women provided the perfect subject to demonstrate disorder at court, effeminacy and decadence of the king and his politics.

The weakness of the king is expressed in his dependency on counsellors (p. 300ff) and, most famously, in the king’s double flight from the battlefield, a ‘motif’ already known from Xerxes’ flight from Greece. But are these indeed mere literary motifs devoid of any historical truth? The counter-argument, as put forward by Nylander, and which may not have been given enough emphasis here (although it is on this issue that the study comes to rest at the end [p. 555]), is that Darius’ action can also be seen as part of royal ideology, namely that the king could not die. While his presence in battle was important for the army, his death would threaten the collapse of army discipline. If we simply reduce this to a literary motif, then we have little left.

Other literary constructs are being identified in the depiction of the dying king who is being offered – and accepts – a drink of water, and who is then contrasted with Alexan–
der’s heroic refusal to accept water from his soldiers in the Gedrosian desert (p. 365ff).

Darius is a despotic king, the absolute ruler over his subjects; Alexander the king who regards himself as primus inter pares among his soldiers.

In the penultimate chapter Briant emphasises that Arabo-Persian literature reveals the same desideratum in terms of allowing the last Achaemenid king historical recognition (p. 463). Credit must be given for the inclusion of the Iranian literature on the subject, which points to the presentation of Alexander as either the destroyer of the Sacred Books of the Persians according to Zoroastrian tradition, or as a good king who is regarded as the offspring of Darius, and therefore the legitimate successor to the Persian throne.

The discussion of the historicity of the documents in this section becomes much more problematic. Similar to the earlier inclusion of plays and the Alexander Romance this is a literary discussion, commenting on the use of the Islamic literature, and including non-historical texts. As has been well acknowledged, their historical value is extremely difficult to extrapolate. No ancient historian would use this material other than with considerable caution. Their main point, to explain the rule of Alexander in Iran, and to create a familial link to the last Achaemenid king in order to legitimise his reign, surely follows a centuries-old tradition (e.g., Cyrus II and his ‘link’ with Assurbanipal, or the link between Alexander and Nectanebo claimed in the Alexander Romance) and continued into right through to the medieval period and the foundation myths of medieval nationes (see the study by N. Kersken, Geschichtsschreibung im Europa der ‘nationes’. Nationalgeschichtliche Gesamtdarstellungen im Mittelalter, Köln 1995).

What then, is the achievement of this study? It undoubtedly makes a valuable contribution to the discussion of the complex problems involved in the assessment of the ancient sources, and therefore will have to be noticed by all scholars engaged in the study of the history of Alexander. But the strong emphasis placed here on the literary character of the sources makes this a predominantly literary and historiographical work, to the point where one has to ask whether there is any historical value in the sources, or if they are indeed to be reduced to merely literary and rhetorical anecdotes. The extensive discussion of the classical ancient authors, on whom historical scholarship as well as non-historical works have been based, and the discussion of the Arab-Persian historical documents which are at best tertiary sources, as well as Arab-Persian non-historical works, arrives at the conclusion that this is how we have to read this material.

If we have to dismiss these authors and their writings as a historical source and merely look at these as literary works, then this view has consequences for the historical discussion not only of Darius III, but also of Alexander. Are we, as Briant seems to imply, to regard, if not all, then much of the history of Alexander as literary fiction because it was written only centuries later and was then influenced by contemporary politics and literary conventions? But surely it cannot be suggested that these histories of Alexander were written after a historical vacuum of several centuries. Or are we to accept the account on Alexander but dismiss the account on Darius? Yet the ancient authors clearly were informed about Persian customs and institutions, about concepts of kingship which we cannot simply discard as rhetoric. How then are we to decide which stories reflect historical events and which are literary fiction? As pointed out above, even the cases Briant puts forward as literary constructs, are not clear-cut.

The method employed here reduces history to a literary and rhetorical exercise rather than a discipline. This is a highly controversial approach to historical discussion. It might be far more effective to recognise that historians used literary means to emphasise certain points, but placed those within the description of a historical event. Herodotus employs similar means to discredit Cambyses and Xerxes, as the Alexander-historians do to emphasise Darius' weakness as a king. Stereotyping was as much an issue for Greek historians who wrote about Persia after the Greco-Persian wars as it was for those historians who wrote the history of Alexander – contemporary and later. If we reduce this history to a literary construct, we avoid the real issue, namely to address the question why the Persian army was defeated and why the death of Darius is synonymous with the end of the empire.

Adding a final comment to this discussion, Briant is correct when he states that our primary written and archaeological sources about Darius III are limited. Considering his brief reign, which was dominated by the war against Alexander, the lack of major building work should not strike us as odd. Even if the written Near Eastern evidence reveals little about Darius or his politics, it still forms an important primary source, especially considering the brevity of the reign. In comparison, it is worth reminding ourselves of how little these sources say about Alexander himself. On the basis of the Babylonian chronicles or the astronomical diaries alone, which, after all are the most genuine primary sources we have for him, we would know nothing about Alexander's campaigns, as these texts took little note of his 12-year reign and his conquest of the Persian satrapies.

A general concern is the presentation of the discussion. While ancient authors are amply quoted in footnotes, references to modern secondary literature are predominantly restricted to the 'Complementary Notes' at the end of the book, but this means that specific points of discussion are not always referenced or cannot easily be verified. This is even more important since a considerable element of the discussion is based on recent scholarship.

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