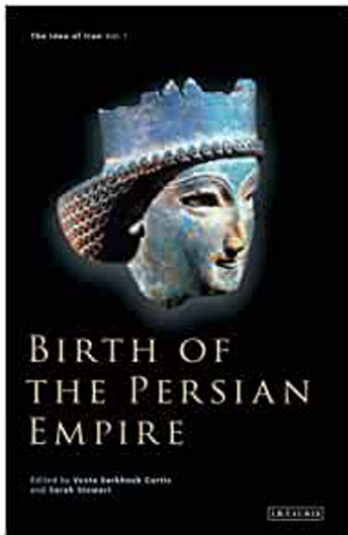


## Birth of the Persian Empire

Sarkosh Curtis (V.), Stewart (S.) (edd.) Pp. 147, ills.  
London: I.B. Tauris, 2005. Cased, £90 (Paper,  
£26.09). ISBN: 978-1-84511-062-8.

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*The Birth of the Persian Empire* is a lecture series compiled by Vesta Sarkosh Curtis of the British Museum, and Sarah Stewart of the London Middle East Institute at SOAS. In this lecture series they have brought together six of the most knowledgeable experts in their fields. Together they have managed to elucidate The Persian Empire from the very beginning to its eventual climax. They have sketched out the peoples, religious beliefs, practices and social structures of an era spanning more than 1000 years.

In the introduction to the book the editors make this statement about the purpose of the book and why it originated:

‘It was prompted by a desire to explore the multifarious ideas about the notion of Iran beginning with the Achaemenid hegemony. . . . The title of the Present Volume broadens the approach and takes into account research undertaken during the past fifteen years.’

This is then indeed an incredible feat, as interest in Iran and Iranian Studies has only grown since the publication of this volume, despite certain political and ideological disputes that have gained momentum since *The Birth of the Persian Empire* was published. The academics involved in this volume are Prof. DT Potts (University of Sydney), Frantz Grenet (CNRS), Prof. P.O. Skjærvo (Harvard University), Albert de Jong (University of Leiden), A. Shapur Shahbazi (Eastern Oregon University) and John Curtis OBE (The British Museum).

The first paper written by Daniel Potts deals with the Elamites, and the contribution that the Elamites made ultimately to the formation of the ethnic and cultural identity of the Persian Empire, especially under Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE. Potts argues very correctly that the Elamite contribution to Iran has been neglected; he then takes the reader on a tour of archaeological sites in what is described as the Main Core of the Elamite Cultural Zone. The volume contains beautiful photographs and illustrations of these sites, mainly Elam and Anshan, to bolster his argument on the importance of Elam.

The second paper is by Frantz Genet who looks at the Persian Empire from the perspective of archaeology, philology and

topography. He applies these disciplines to the study and influence of the Avestan peoples in Central Asia and the Hindu Kush. Then the focus is on their migration from east to west through modern Afghanistan, thus trying to establish if the early Achaemenids were Zoroastrians through the remnants of their Indo-Iranian language. In the study of the second part of his paper Genet outlines his own ideas about the geography of the region and divides the area into four, where he describes the influences of each group in that area.

The following paper in Chapter 3 is written by Oktor Skjærvo and Albert de Jong. They discuss the idea of Iran from a religious perspective. And again it asks the contentious question of whether the early Achaemenid kings were Zoroastrians. They focus on the collections of oral texts that were first compiled in the Eastern Iranian dialect and how they were interpreted by priests in the west. Both the authors of this paper show the difficulty in dealing with these texts primarily because of their oral nature and redactions that were made over time. Both Skjærvo and De Jong are, however, in a greater sense, in agreement that the early kings were indeed Zoroastrians. They reach this conclusion via very different routes and as mentioned above they are only broadly similar, because they do have some very key areas of difference, notably the role the king played in ceremonial religious duties.

In Chapter 4, De Jong focuses on what is meant by Zoroastrianism in the time of the early Achaemenid kings. His focus is primarily is on the concept of magic as applied to the word *magus*. Although this is a Greek word, De Jong uses Greek sources to expand our understanding of the use of *magus* as either a Zoroastrian priest or a sorcerer. The reader is brought squarely into contact with the ambiguity of the use of the word - one with a connotation of being religiously divine and the other having sinister motives and applications. Mainly De Jong establishes that these *magi* were the Persian keepers of religious tradition and played an important role in education. They were not just some subset of the Median Tribe, but an important factor in the social life of the Empire, with the most important contribution of the *magi* being the lasting impact of the Zoroastrian religion on Iranian civilisation and empire.

In Chapter 5, Shapur Shahbazi firmly places the origins of the idea of Iran way before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE during the reign of the Sasanian king Ardashir I. The idea of ‘The Empire of the Iranians’ had already existed in the Avestan period. He sees the evidence for this idea of unity already in the Avestan hymn dedicated to Mithra. The idea of Iran was even known to the Achaemenids, but because their empire included peoples from different ethnic backgrounds it was not possible at that time to use the term ‘Empire of Iran.’

The concluding chapter is by John Curtis and it is a tour de force that underpins the formation of the Iranian culture from the Iron Age, to the great migrations of people speaking Indo-Iranian languages. He goes on to discuss important archaeological sites in this development from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE - sites like Marlik Tepe in northern Iran and Hasanlu in western Iran. He even looks at the possible influence of Assyrian culture in the development of the Iranian culture. He finds evidence for this in the area of Bukan where tiles have stylised figures on them that are clearly influenced by Assyria, such as human-headed winged creatures and birds of prey.

Curtis also examines the Median-period site of Nush-i Jan. His conclusion from the examination of this site is that there was no period prior to 550 BCE in which this Median site experienced a suspension of activities. Curtis even goes further to draw on pre-Achaemenid evidence to show the development of Achaemenid art styles most notably in Persepolis itself. He also agrees with the idea that there are noticeable Persian influences in Greece, most notably on the reliefs of the Parthenon friezes.

This relatively thin book holds many key developments in the study of Iran. And the editors did a magnificent job of bringing so many views together in this short volume. As a resource for scholars, it is a massive help, even to the person who is looking only for one specific reference. Whether you are a graduate or post-graduate student this compilation will be of help to you in furthering your studies or focusing your research. The ideas are many and the conclusions profound but most of all it shows the world the possibilities of great research undertaken without any foregone conclusions and the love of a culture that transcends national boundaries; like the Persian Empire itself.

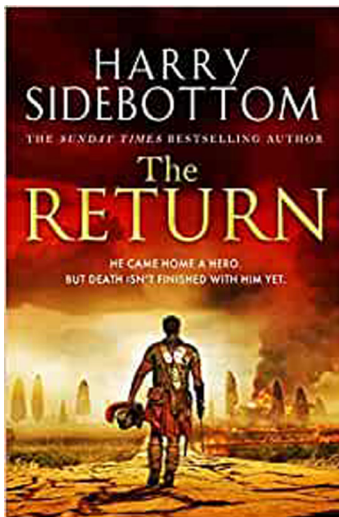
doi: 10.1017/S2058631021000611

## The Return

Sidebottom (H.) Pp 304, map. London: Zaffre, 2020. Cased, £14.99. ISBN:978-1-785-76963-4. <https://www.zaffrebooks.co.uk/books/the-return/>

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*The Return's* protagonist, suitably and ironically named, Gaius Furius Paullus arrives home in Temesa after three years of military service, decorated by the *corona civica*. Polluted by a killing just as he arrives home, he is also pursued by the Furies on account of his experience and actions during his time in the army. The story alternates between flashbacks to Paullus' military life, presented in chapters entitled *Militia 608/607 Ab Urbe Condita* (147–146 BC) and the murder mystery he is solving in his

present existence, presented in chapters entitled *Patria 609 Ab Urbe Condita* (145 BC).

Generally speaking, as someone who has striven endlessly over the years of my career to make the ancient world a lively and relevant place for the students I teach, I would recommend this book both to high school teachers and students of the ancient world, as another resource for adding colour and life to the study of this time period. Sidebottom is clearly well-versed in Roman history and culture and the inclusion of many small details (*lares, genius, mos maiorum, ubi tu Gaius, ego Gaia* to list just a few) combines with action and adventure to build a vivid big picture of that world.

As a middle-school Latin teacher with a strong background in Aegean pre-history, I didn't feel I knew much about the

historical background to this book and found myself having to research the sack of Corinth in 146BC and the demise of the Achaean League, as well as the geographical setting of the Sila and Temesa in the murder-mystery aspect of the plot. I presume most school students reading this book would have to do the same but it was not an obstacle to my enjoyment of the plot by any means.

Again, as a middle-school Latin teacher, I probably wouldn't recommend this book to any of my 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade students due to occasional language and descriptions of violence, but I could see it being a useful addition to a high school library as well as an ancillary tool to high school units on the Roman military. Sometimes, units on the Roman military can prove a little dry and I think using extracts from *The Return* would provoke interesting class discussions and provide the opportunity to make connections with the modern world as Sidebottom's hero experiences combat stress and guilt as a result of his time in the army. Moreover, I think students would enjoy reading or hearing about the different components of the legion such as *hastati, principes, triarii* or *velites* in the context of a story rather than lists of jobs soldiers could do which is how most text books present them. In addition, extracts from the book could be used to illuminate student knowledge of Roman agriculture and animal husbandry. I, for one, now have a clearer idea of what the practice of winnowing involves!

In conclusion, I enjoyed *The Return* sufficiently to hope that Gaius Furius Paullus makes a reappearance in a sequel at some point. After all, surely something noteworthy was occurring somewhere in the Roman world in the aftermath of *The Return's* conclusion in 612 *Ab Urbe Condita* (142 BC)? Paullus could next participate in the Third Celtiberian war perhaps? Whatever he may do, this Latin teacher looks forward to reading about it.

doi: 10.1017/S2058631021000477

## Themistocles. The Powerbroker of Athens

Smith (J.A.). Pp. xxviii + 284, maps, colour pls. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2021. Cased, £20. ISBN: 9781526790453

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At the opening, the author's stated aim is 'to understand the mythos of Themistocles' (pp.x). Whether this book is successful in achieving the stated aim of its author, is open to debate. Clearly an admirer of his subject, Smith offers the reader a Themistocles who is blessed with a political acumen far above his contemporaries; however, this does, at times, in my opinion, afford Themistocles too much credit. Smith ends the introduction of his work by noting that Themistocles was a man who transcended a typical political career to end Greek mythology as a hero in the vein of Odysseus, Achilles or Theseus, yet the historical Themistocles is a man who made mistakes and died ignominiously, despite his once glittering political career.