



*Persian Interventions: The Achaemenid Empire, Athens and Sparta, 450–386 BCE* by John O. Hyland.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2018. Pp. xi, 257. ISBN 978–1–4214–2370–8.

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Historian John Hyland (Christopher Newport Univ.) presents a revisionist thesis that will interest students of comparative imperialism, specifically, that Persian autocrats concluded that Greek tribute was not worth the vast cost of reconquest and direct governance of the city-states of Ionia. On this view, Persian foreign policy reflected not “strategic realism,” but a confident ideology of universal supremacy and a divine mandate to stabilize the Empire’s edges (5). Defensive balancing of competitors was not even a consideration, since Athens and Sparta were never perceived as “equals” to the Iranian Empire. The Persians preferred a trans-Aegean peace to perpetual wars against the Greeks (with concomitant loss of revenues from Anatolia). Opting to incentivize cooperation rather than fight battles, they aggressively sought gestures of obedience rather than tribute payments from fringe peoples (8).

As the author correctly observes (chap. 1), the prevailing ancient and modern views of the intentions and policies of the Persian Empire rest on the “weak evidentiary foundations” (5) of our inadequate, late, and fragmentary primary sources. In *Persian Interventions*, Hyland provides a welcome, long overdue study of a period and topic not surveyed since David Lewis’ integrated the Persepolis financial tablets into the discussion.

After Xerxes retreated east from Salamis Bay in autumn 480 BC, leaving the Athenians shortly to become preeminent in the east Aegean, how did the rulers of the world’s largest empire come to terms with recalcitrant Athens and Sparta? How did the conditions of their coexistence change between the poorly attested Peace of Callias (ca. 449 BC) and the humiliation of the King’s Peace (387 BC), which ceded to Persia “hegemonic patronage” and the power to collect taxes from cities along the Anatolian littoral, while forgoing difficult total subjugation (8)? The history is obscured by the Persian kings’ roster of rotating satraps and governors. Our main contemporary sources<sup>2</sup> try to rationalize enemy satraps’ off-and-on efforts. Their indirect evidence for Achaemenid policy compelled them to doubt the Persians’ commitment to a quick decision (12).

Hyland detects robust “Achaemenid self-confidence” throughout the period. Artaxerxes I (465–424 BC), successor to his murdered father, Xerxes, patiently awaited opportunities to regain revenues lost after coastal Anatolia’s revolt (chap. 2), which cost the Persians both symbolic power and taxes. A peace with the Athenian Empire (*archē*) and client-states would save money on fleet-building and serious maintenance. Triremes (fast warships with three banks of oars) were

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1. In *Sparta and Persia* (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

2. Thucydides, Xenophon, the fragmentary *Oxyrhynchia Hellenica*, and (here unexploited) Ctesias; on the latter, see now the helpful introduction and translation of Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and James Robson, *Ctesias’ “History of Persia”: Tales of the Orient* (NY: Routledge, 2010). Hyland also cites inscriptions, coins, papyri, and such later historical sources as Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, and Cornelius Nepos. He underutilizes recent discoveries of Persian bureaucracy and sociology.

expensive and needed replacing every fifteen years or so. The cessation of diplomatic crises and military conflicts after the battle of the Eurymedon River (ca. 466 BC) presaged some informal or formal arrangement like the Peace of Callias.

A virtue of Hyland's discussion is his attention to evidence for Persian finances, such as the Elephantine papyrus of ca. 411 BC (25). From this and literary sources like Herodotus, he extrapolates the cost of a Mediterranean trireme fleet, including sailors' wages, food distribution costs, and support vessels (whose requisitioning diminished lucrative merchant shipping).

Uncertainty as to how such enormous expenses were covered is suggested by the following locutions in a single paragraph (27): "may have," "evidence is lacking," "would have been," "a plausible source," "if Persia gathered," "might have limited," "would have come," "would have likely increased," "might have diminished." Legitimate hypothesizing can insidiously lead to dubious conclusions via a "progressive fallacy": hence, we read, Artaxerxes's "nautical frugality *could* help outweigh concessions" (my emphasis), but "a wave of profit followed" (28) from ubiquitous "toll income."

A better idea: the Persians preferred an uneasy, unsigned peace with Athens (allowing Athenian control of commerce but Persian tolls in imperial ports) to openly backing the unproven, unfunded Peloponnesian navy (41). During the Peloponnesian War (chap. 3), Darius II (r. 424–404), bastard son of Artaxerxes, postponed a Persian-Athenian conflict for a decade by the attested Peace of Epilycus (422 BC). In 413, however, as the Athenian Empire reeled from its Sicilian debacle, Darius reclaimed direct Anatolian tribute, ensuring a confrontation with Athens, now termed (via another progressive fallacy) "his principal Greek client" (46). His plan was optimistic and premature, yet plausible. His Anatolian satraps, Pharnabazus and Tissaphernes, competed for twenty years for continuing authority in lucrative office.

"Tissaphernes' war" (chap. 4) disputes Thucydides's analysis of the eternally opaque motivations of this frugal satrap and his master in Susa. The Athenians were divided over continuing a war against two powerful opponents, while the Spartan commanders were inconsistent in their strategy and the exiled Athenian general Alcibiades proved useful to his Persian protector, since bluffing is cheaper than fighting.

Why did Tissaphernes not bring west the King's Phoenician navy (147 ships) for the kill (chap. 5)? The author guesses that the satraps were mired in oscillating circumstances and that Tissaphernes was more a blundering egotist (88) than Machiavel, rejecting Thucydides's cautious explanations as conjectural.<sup>3</sup> His own conjecture, however, ignores Tissaphernes's angering of Peloponnesian crews (8.99, near mutinies) and essential Ionian allies (imposed garrison expulsions), and failure to imprison his slippery adviser, Alcibiades. So, after Darius II outfitted, trained, and deployed his huge armada to Aspendus, he then soon "cut losses" and sent it back without having seen action. Hyland supposes (via yet another progressive fallacy) that unattested circumstances "demanded the fleet's recall" (90). Tissaphernes's duplicity, playing footsy with Spartans while allegiant to the monarch, did not address the younger Cyrus's autocratic ambition.

A distracting intra-Achaemenid feud simmered beneath the surface of these wars (chap. 6). Allied with the Spartan commander Lysander, Cyrus the Younger betrayed his father, Darius II, hoping to inherit the kingdom before his older brother, Artaxerxes II, could secure it. To that end, he escalated the fighting in Ionia, spent five hundred talents of precious metal, doubled the fleet

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3. Thuc. 8.87 (with his earlier analysis at 8.46). Hyland forgets that modern scholars have less evidence than did Thucydides, who, in his perplexity, offers four different hypotheses, including "balancing enemies."

for his Spartan allies, and enrolled new battalions in Anatolia.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent naval victory off Notion gained Cyrus credibility with the Peloponnesians, but the Athenians then inflicted a severe naval defeat on them at Kyzikos. Eventually, his estranged brother Artaxerxes, having taken power in 405/4 BC, allowed Cyrus to continue his western Anatolian command. Cyrus's headstrong personality kept him from achieving what his predecessors had failed to do against the Athenians (127).

After Cyrus's death (and posthumous beheading) in 399 BC, Tissaphernes kept betting on the wrong horse and displaying "conspicuous inaction" (135). His failure finally led to his clandestine arrest and (non-posthumous) decapitation in 394 BC (139). Pharnabazus, in contrast, showed initiative in working with the Athenian Conon to defeat King Agesilaus's now hostile Spartans and re-establish Hellenic cities' tribute to King Artaxerxes II. After Spartan commander Lysander died in the Corinthian War, Agesilaus was recalled to Europe to face an anti-Spartan coalition. Pharnabazus and exiled Conon won a decisive victory at Cnidus in 394 BC (143) against the once Persian-financed fleet of quite recent Spartan allies!

The last chapter leads up to Persian success: the King's Peace ended a quarter-century of intermittent Anatolian warfare. Peace might have come earlier but for the dearth of competent diplomats on both sides. Athens (under re-admitted Conon), Corinth, Thebes, and Argos spent the new satrap Tiribazus's darics to fund their anti-Spartan Quadruple Alliance. Hyland again spurns the obvious Persian "balancing strategy" explanation—let the Hellenes kill each other indefinitely (148, 158, 170).<sup>5</sup>

Despite Athenian propaganda about (pseudo-) autonomy, revenue extortion, and manhandling of women, Persian suzerainty and traditional Ionian institutions were compatible (162). Artaxerxes II, Hyland shows (143–46), deserves more credit than hostile Greek sources give him. The Achaemenids could "display ... benevolent imperialism" (166) and guaranteed Greeks an "autonomy" they could not provide each other. Artaxerxes "stabilize[d] the Aegean" until Philip the Macedonian exacted a long-postponed Hellenic "revenge." The Persians maintained their imperial "world" ideology while allowing Athens or Sparta to pursue Anatolian pacification in vain. The author writes that they proclaimed (to whom?) that these (and therefore all) Hellenes were submissive clients.

The author dubs his epoch of interest "the [Persian] interventionist period" (3), but the Hellenes themselves were equally aggressive in Anatolia, especially Agesilaus. One can trace Greek vs. Persian—and Greek vs. Greek—conflict and (broken) contracts back at least to the end of the Persian Wars (479 BC) or forward to Macedonian interventionist "revenge" propaganda and strategies (334–330 BC), using sources in Greek, Persian, Latin, Aramaic, etc.

Hyland claims our Greek sources lacked access to Persian administrators and misread signals and consequences. Where the Greeks perceived Achaemenid lethargy and acceptance of Hellenic superiority, he argues, the Persians were cleverly furthering their own strategic interests with less expenditure of money and men and no loss of precious diplomatic "face." His reading of conflict-

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4. Hyland provides estimates for various Persian subsidies (table 6.3, a summary), perhaps 3,500 talents total. Thucydides (2.65.12) regards Cyrus's assistance as the last straw producing Athens' defeat.

5. Hyland religiously cites scholarly positions in forty-eight pages of notes, but is parsimonious in presenting their arguments.

ing sources allows but does not clinch this interpretation.<sup>6</sup> He ambitiously discerns lessons here for historians of “later states with aspiration to universal dominance” (172), but Thucydides’s careful explications of war’s causes and consequences suggest hesitation in prognosis.<sup>7</sup>

*Persian Interventions* provides a coherent discussion of the financial and military aspects of Persia’s puzzling policy in western Anatolia, but also too many overconfident explanatory hypotheses. The spotty ancient evidence stymies secure reconstructions of what happened and the undeterminable motives of Alcibiades, Tissaphernes, Cyrus, or even Agesilaus.

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6. References to Persian “flawed expectations,” “misguided retention,” “missteps,” and “misunderstandings” (170) presuppose that we can evaluate Persian actions, intentions, and success based on hostile witnesses who lacked Persian language skills and documents.

7. See, e.g., Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2017)—with my review at *MiWSR* 2017-063.