

Victory Ma

Professor Howe

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Alexander's Assimilation into Persia

It is difficult to ascertain whether or not the Greeks ultimately and truly ‘conquered’ Persia, or if Persia conquered Greece. Ever since the Greco-Persian Wars, *polypragmosyne*, or meddling (from Persia) became a constant throughout the Greek poleis. Cyrus the Great and his successors had expansive territories, wealth, and armies. They were able to exploit Greek animosity toward one another so that they wouldn’t interfere with their goals. Most notably, the end of the Peloponnesian War saw Persia being a deciding factor in Sparta’s victory—*polypragmosyne* to its greatest extent. If the Persians did not physically win a battle against the Greeks (i.e. the Battle at Marathon), they would find another way to exert their dominance over the Hellenic world, essentially conquering it through proxy wars. On the other hand, fast-forward to 323 BCE, Alexander the Great controlled much of what was formerly the Persian Empire. By leading the Hellenic League’s army built up by his father, Philip II, he swiftly spread his influence and control across the territories of Persia. He was able to take control of these territories efficiently because of his unique forms of diplomacy, which assimilated himself into the Persian culture. If we used the popular game series *Civilization* to encapsulate the relationship Alexander the Great had with Persia, Alexander achieved a ‘domination victory’ over Darius III and the Achaemenid dynasty. However, in losing its

territory to Alexander, the Persian Empire was still able to achieve a ‘culture victory’. As he was walking the tightrope between absolute monarch and military general, Alexander deliberately accepted the values of Persia to be perceived more as a liberator. Thus, he continued Persian ideologies and traditions, which indirectly continued the empire. Henceforth, we will be analyzing why Carol King has the more plausible opinion on Greco-Persian relations from 500 to 323 BCE. The Persians essentially conquered Greece before the rise of Makedonia—by starting wars in the Hellenic world—and paradoxically, even when they were eventually conquered by Alexander, much of the young Makedonian’s diplomatic success can be attributed to him assimilating into Persian culture and accepting its people.

The Greco-Persian Wars created a deeply rooted hatred between the Greeks and Persians. Each of them struggled for control over the Aegean, and each had its own ideologies, culture, and religion. This relationship quickly became ingrained in Greek culture, as they accrued valor and told stories about defeating the Persians. Otherwise, when they lost battles, they accrued grievances and resentment. The controversial yet useful Herodotos wrote, “...when Phrynichos put on the capture of Miletos as a play, the theatre was moved to tears and the Athenians fined him 1,000 drachmas for having revived the memory of what was in fact a domestic disaster and forbade anyone ever again to use this theme” (Herodotos 6.20-22). The father of history often exaggerated his accounts, but this excerpt nonetheless showcases how Persians quickly became a staple in the minds of the Greeks. The Athenians were distraught by their losses during the Ionian Revolt and began to acknowledge the power of the Achaemenid dynasty. Playwrights like Aeschylus would have similar themes in his play *The Persians*, by highlighting the might of the Persian Empire in order to bolster Athenian military prowess. Within all of this, the power,

wealth, and destructive capabilities of Persia started to live in the minds of the Greeks.

Herodotos later wrote, “If the Athenians...had abandoned their country...Greece would have become subject to the Persians...And so anyone who said that the Athenians were the saviors of Greece would be perfectly correct” (Herodotos 7.139.1-6). He is writing in a pro-Athenian manner, and it is clear that Athens was quite proud of their military successes over Persia. They see the empire as a force that has almost no comparison. In fact, during the Peloponnesian War, Athens and Sparta both wanted support—money, troops, etc.—from Persia. This inherently illustrated Greece’s willingness to set aside past grievances for a strategic advantage. More notably, this showcases the might of the Persian empire and its capability to sway the tide of the Hellenic world. Consequently, the Persian kings would take advantage of Greek inner conflict for the benefit of their empire. Artaxerxes I and his successors exploited the rivalry between Athens and Sparta by offering financial aid to weaken Athenian power, which was stronger. Aware of the vast wealth and maritime prowess of Athens and eventually the Delian League, the Persians—in their ingenuity—backed the weaker Sparta. The historian and general Thucydides wrote, “the Lakedaimonians...[and others of the league]...were on their way to Asia to the King, to try to persuade him to provide money and join in the war on their side (but were captured by the Athenians)” (Thucydides 2.67.1). History will say that the Lakedaimonians ultimately won the Peloponnesian War with the support of the Persians, which is true. However, it is paramount that one mentions the nuance of the Persian Empire’s intervention. Xenophon, the (essentially) Spartan historian wrote, “...[the Athenian general Konon said] ‘you will gratify the Athenians in this way and punish the Lakedaimonians; for you will undo for them the achievement for which they labored most.’ And when Pharnabazos heard this he gladly sent him to Athens and in

addition gave him money for the work of fortification.” Within this, we see that the Persian Empire financially supported both sides of Greece at some point. This is perhaps indicative of what the Achaemenids were trying to achieve; they wanted to keep the Greeks busy with themselves so that they wouldn’t unify against Persia.

After a few centuries of fighting each other, the Makedonians leading the Hellenic League finally crossed into Asia, seeking conquest. Alexander the Great’s invasion of the Persian Empire marked a power shift; his conquests brought an end to the Achaemenid dynasty and began the Hellenistic period in Asia. However, his campaign couldn’t have been as successful if he hadn’t assimilated into Persian culture and ways of life. For instance, in taking Egypt, he purported himself as a liberator rather than an enemy. The Greek historian of the Roman period Arrian, wrote, “Alexander was...seeking to trace his birth back to Ammon, just as mythology traces that of Heracles and Perseus to Zeus” (Arrian 3.3-4). In his ingenuity, Alexander named himself the son of Zeus-Ammon, reflecting his willingness to assimilate into foreign cultures. In doing so, he gained support for his campaign and continued the legacy of the Persian Empire. The Achaemenid dynasty was declining, but the Persian way of life persisted through Alexander. In fact, Arrian wrote, “...when Alexander entered Karia, [the queen] went to meet him, surrendering Alinda and adopting Alexander as her son. Alexander accepted the title of son, and [later] gave her back her queendom” (Arrian 1.23.8). Throughout his conquests, Alexander was adopted by multiple queens under Persian rule. Strangely, this form of diplomacy helped him secure further support and further highlighted his acceptance of Persian culture. His campaign was successful, largely in part due to how he went about public relations. Within this, he started to create this Hellenistic culture, melding Persia and Greek-ness together. Perdikkas, by way of

Diodoros, outlines many of Alexander's future plans if he lived longer. Diodoros wrote, "[Alexander wanted to] settle cities and transplant populations from Asia to Europe and vice versa from Europe to Asia, to bring the largest continents through intermarriage and ties of kinship to a common harmony and feeling of friendship" (Diodoros 18.4.1-6). The military generals of Alexander did not follow suit, but it is clear that Alexander was quite fond of Persian culture, even to the annoyance of soldiers through his "Persian dress" (Arrian 7.8-9 and 11). Alexander deliberately continued the legacy of the Persian culture to ensure the success of the campaign. Thus, it is clear that the Persians essentially conquered Greece through Alexander, even when under new leadership.

In conclusion, the Persian Empire meddled with Hellenic affairs for many generations. They directly fought the Greeks during the Greco-Persian wars. They supported Sparta in their victory in the Peloponnesian War. Furthermore, Satraps financially supported poleis to ensure that no one polis would ever become overwhelmingly powerful, as to rival the Persians. Before the rise of Makedonia, Persia essentially conquered Greece by way of proxy wars. It was only when Philip II built up an army to be used by Alexander the Great, did the Greeks finally become capable of physically conquering Persia. Technically, one could say the Hellenic League defeated the Achaemenid dynasty and thus the Persian Empire. However, Alexander was only able to do so through his careful and deliberate diplomacy that had him immersed in Persian culture. Paradoxically, the Persian Empire, in its defeat was able to persist in spirit, culture, and way of life, because of the young Makedonian's willingness to accept its culture. Thus, it is clear that Persia ultimately conquered Greece throughout this time period.