



## Semiramis' Legacy: The History of Persia According to Diodorus of Sicily

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**Semiramis’ Legacy: The History of Persia According to Diodorus of Sicily**, Jan P. Stronk, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2017, ISBN 978-1-4744-1425-8, hardback, xviii + 606 pp.

This is the most recent work on Diodorus of Sicily, a famous ancient historian who dealt with the history of ancient Iran, translated by an eminent scholar who has previously also translated Ctesias’ *Persica*. The book under review offers an English translation of the text together with a valuable introduction to Diodorus, his method, his views, and the structure of the *Bibliotheca historica*, and is also followed by a rich investigation of the extant manuscripts and of some editions of Diodorus’ *Bibliotheca*.

The English translation is excellent. Jan Stronk succeeds in following the original text as closely as possible but also pays attention to the eloquence of the writing. As is obvious from the title, *Semiramis’ Legacy: The History of Persia According to Diodorus of Sicily*, Stronk has not dealt with the whole *Bibliotheca historica* but with those parts which are relevant to the history of Iran. In choosing not to work on some unrelated parts of *Bibliotheca historica*, he has tried to “avoid making this an edition with a full commentary” (p. 2). He has nevertheless “found it necessary to comment on several remarks in Diodorus’ account” (p. 2). To this end, he has divided the book into ten chapters. The first and last chapters deal, respectively, with Diodorus’ sources and Semiramis’ legacy. The latter gives the book its title. The rest of the book—chapters 2–9—are the translations, starting with the Assyrian history and ending with the vicissitudes of the Diadoch kingdoms.

Recognizing that the importance of a primary source rests on its sources, Jan Stronk devotes the first chapter to the study of these sources. Apart from this chapter, among his remarks in footnotes he continually, as far as it is possible, investigates the probable sources of Diodorus’ various narratives.

Chapter 2 is on the Assyrian, Chaldean, and Median histories. One can mention that, according to Stronk, Ctesias was not the only source of Diodorus' history of the Assyrian empire. Since the narrative of Semiramis' campaign against India has much in common with that of Alexander, it is possible that, as Stronk argues, Diodorus may have used not only Ctesias but also at the same time other sources, i.e. Dinon and/or Clitarchus. One should note that other historians, notably Nicholas of Damascus, have written on Semiramis as well; however, because of chronological discrepancies, he is not considered a source for Diodorus in the story of Semiramis.

The next two chapters deal with Achaemenid history from Cyrus the Great to Artaxerxes III. The narratives of the reigns of Cyrus the Great, Cambyses II, Darius the Great, and finally Xerxes I are included in Chapter 3, entitled "The Persians and the Greek Wars." Chapter 4, "Revolt and Sedition," covers the reigns of Artaxerxes I, Xerxes II, Sogdianus, Darius II, Artaxerxes II Mnemon, and Artaxerxes III Ochus.

Alexander the Great, arguably among the most famous figures in the ancient world, is given most attention in *Bibliotheca historica* and this is the main reason for devoting two chapters of the book to his era. The first episodes in Chapter 5, "Alexander the Great Defeats Darius III," deal with his Iranian antagonist, Darius III. Interestingly, being the opponent of Alexander the Great, Darius III has gained relatively more attention in Diodorus' account than the previous Achaemenid kings. Three great battles between the Macedonian army and the Achaemenid troops along with Alexander's entry into Persepolis are what Diodorus described in the passages that follow in this chapter.

The following four chapters (6–9) provide Diodorus' narrative on what happened from when Alexander left Persepolis until his death and the subsequent division of the empire in the period of the Diadochs, and some references to the rise of the Parthian kingdom.

Having translated Diodorus' account, in Chapter 10 of the book Stronk turns his focus back to the beginning of the story, where Diodorus narrates on Semiramis. He finds Semiramis to be "the most prominent figure in the early phases in Diodorus' Library" (p. 525). In fact, Semiramis not being a historical person, Stronk treats her as the background to the idea that she presents. Despite the idea that Semiramis is an invention of the Greek imagination, Stronk brings up the fact that several places in western Asia are stated to have borne her name. Though there are also similarities between Semiramis and two Assyrian queens, namely Šammu-ramāt and Naqī'a/Zakūtu, Stronk prefers to focus on the figure of Ištar/Astarte/Inanna as the background to Semiramis' story. The latter is indeed highly plausible, given the symbolic concept of "dove." Stronk clearly demonstrates the relation between Semiramis and the aforementioned Assyrian queens, yet he holds that "efforts to connect 'Semiramis' with actual occurrences in Assyrian history are therefore largely useless" (p. 527). One can accept that the story is "not a matter of historical fact but of historical belief or perhaps rather of a concept of history" (p. 529). Stronk demonstrates that Ctesias and other historians, such as Diodorus, who followed him, were inspired by the idea of the continuity of empires to rebuild a history for older empires, such as the

Assyrian empire. Based on his knowledge of the Achaemenid empire, Ctesias did so. Consequently, it may be argued that anyone who deals with Ctesias, and so with Diodorus, should also pay proper attention to the story of Semiramis. In Stronk's words: "he [Diodorus] almost mirrors the exploits of the Achaemenid kings up to his days" (p. 531). Needless to say, the Achaemenid empire was brought to an end by Alexander the Great, who continued Persian traditions and notably the Persian claim to rule over a vast territory. Here one can see a continuous line from Semiramis, through the Achaemenids, to Alexander; the idea of a universal empire that one can see through the list of peoples bringing tribute to the Achaemenid king.

Later in this chapter, Stronk raises the topic of the taste for luxury that was often attributed to Persians in the Greek view. In fact, the issue of being obsessed with a luxurious lifestyle had long been associated with decadence, especially in Ctesias' report on the history of Assyria. For Ctesias, the reason for the decadence and degeneracy of this empire was the luxurious lifestyle with its feminine associations which had prevailed among Assyrian kings, best personified by King Sardanapalus. Further expansion on the topic of effeminacy in the Greek image of Persia would have been a welcome addition to this chapter—as in fact Stronk perceptively points out that "there occasionally appear to be some elements of a dichotomy between 'East' and 'West' in the *Bibliotheca*" (p. 541). It would be helpful to investigate further the assumed weakness of Persians which has often been portrayed as effeminacy, in opposition to the image of the supposed masculinity of the Greek world. For this, one can refer to Diodorus, II, 45; XI, 56, 7; XI, 57, 1–5; XVII, 32, 1–2; XVII, 35–36; XVII, 70, 6; XVII, 72, 2; XVII, 93, 3; XVII, 108, 4–6.

Stronk's book provides rich material for historians working on Achaemenid Persia and is also a valuable contribution to the study of the ancient history of Iran.

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