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# STUDIES AND ARTICLES

# A "CLASH" OF CIVILIZATIONS IN ANTIQUITY:
# THE GREEK-PERSIAN WARS*

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### Abstract
Though the concept of "clash of civilizations" appeared in contemporary times, it was put into practice ever since antiquity in the form of some epic military confrontations, such as the Greek-Persian Wars. The ancient Eastern world represented by the Persians confronted the ancient Western world represented by the Greeks in a real fight for hegemony, which implied economic interests, spheres of influence, military alliances, technological resources, strategic and military interests and leaders who made history and remained in history. The schema of "clash of civilizations" is observed exactly in the Greek-Persian Wars. The actors of the theatre of operations were two great Indo-European civilizations: the Persians, who represented the ancient East and the Greeks, who represented the ancient West.

The "clash" was due to the Persians' wish to conquer the world, the East proving not to be enough for their geo-political interests. By conquering Greek territories, the Persians establish bridge-heads for the future Greek-Persian Wars. The opening of The Royal Road, one of the longest roads in the ancient world, and the setting of the mail service made Persians dare "adventure" beyond the Eastern frontiers. The East "Fault" wanted the inclusion of the Greek "Fault" with all its geography, economy, colonies and possibilities.

The ancient West won another "clash of civilizations" against the ancient East by the Greek-Persian Wars, after another victory, against Troy, which offered the Greeks their complete "adventure".

**Key words**: *Greek-Persian Wars*, *strategy*, *spheres of influence*, *political-military leaders*, *ancient civilizations*

### Introduction
The theme of our contribution is part of the series of our preoccupations dedicated to the "clash of civilizations" in Antiquity, after two studies on the wars of ancient civilizations (Strechie, 2015a: 370-375; Strechie, 2015b: 391-403).

The theme of the "clash of civilizations" is the pillar of our study, which applies the classical scheme of the "clash" between the civilizations of Antiquity: the Greeks and the Persians. This confrontation was what we would call today an "unconventional war" because the victors were not the ones with the greatest military force, the best organized army and the longest military tradition. The Persians, who founded the first empire as a form of political organization, are unquestionably defeated by the Greek

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polis, democracy defeats monarchy, not by the force of the number, inferior in this case, but by the force of the mind. The Greeks won the Greco-Persian wars, and through them the entire Western Europe, before the Persian Empire, of worldwide proportion, truly almost the whole ancient Near East.

Our study aims to approach the Greco-Persian wars from the perspective of the concept of "clash of civilizations", while insisting on all political, military and cultural aspects, for basically the "clash of civilizations" is also a cultural war (Huntigton, 1998: 1).

What caused this "clash of civilizations" between the "two worlds"? Between the first world, the Greeks, who were not exactly a unitary state within the borders, but were a common conscience of a people, a tongue, a unitary culture, with a wide range of city-states, from tyrannies, oligarchies, democracies and militarist states, and the Persians, the masters of much of the Ancient Orient, a power that took over the territories and hegemonic ambitions of Assyria, Phoenicia, Egypt; the Persians being in fact a quite unitary state, by their administrative-territorial organization and by an unofficial miracle of the ancient world, the "Royal Road", the road between Susa and Sardes that developed the entire Persian communication system, namely the post. Nevertheless, the Persians' struggle for hegemony was stopped by the Greeks, the inventors of one of the most beautiful human mentality, heroism. If the hegemony and the lust for power of the Persians made possible this conflict of epic proportions between the "two worlds", actually "two cultural identities" (Huntigton, 1998: 265), its unfolding was full of unexpected events. Thus, in the beginning, the Persians were victorious, advancing strongly into the Greek archipelago through the initial enslavement of Lydia and then of the Ionian Islands, but they could not secure these Persian outposts in a lasting peace, because the Greek political genius won the war by very important victories at the right time, of morale and cohesion for all Greeks.

The conquest of Lydia and the Ionian Islands meant for the Persians a poisoned gift of the Greek gods, because through them the Greek enemy was very close and could study them. The conquest of the Ionian Islands also opened the way for a "competitive cohabitation" between the Persians and the Greeks, and the beginning of a war of "fault lines" (Huntigton, 1998: 265, 305) between the Western "fault" – the Greeks – the Eastern "fault" – the Persians – for a defence war in the case of the Greeks, for a hegemony war in the case of the Persians. It was for the second time that the Greeks were faced with a "clash of civilizations" in the posture of the invaded, after, long before, in the days of their epics, they themselves had initiated a "clash of civilizations" with Troy, their commercial rival in particular, when they had been the invaders. Greece won every time, although not in one case or in another was it what is called a "political entity" (Huntigton, 1998: 62), i.e. a unitary state, a monolith like Troy, or a multinational empire, but assimilated as was Persia (Cyrus the Great is the first emperor to assimilate his subjects by initiating Persanization, the loyal model of the much better-known Romanization process).

What made the victory of this "Greek adventure" (Lévêque, 1987: 1) possible every time? We believe that politics, regardless of the fact that it was manifested in the form of a monarchy, in the case of the conflicts with Troy, regardless of the fact that it was the democracy of the polis, during the Greco-Persian wars. Greece was not

a state entity, but it was a cultural entity, especially by its heroes, who have inspired generations since the war of the heroes, the Trojan war, which brought victory to it. Culture, manifested at every political, military, institutional, material, scientific, informational level, made such leaders as Themistocles or Leonidas remain in history as the defeaters of the Persians.

This very cultural unity made the Greeks be one in the fight against the Persians, because, as mentioned by the late professor, who, by her work, was a teacher to all who loved ancient history: "the Greeks are ... victorious through their collectivity, although poor, over an imperial army full of force and wealth-gold" (Petre, 2000: 201). So in a war gold does not matter too much, understood here as logistics, technology, multitude of troops and weapons, but people, from simple soldiers to the supreme leader, the commander.

Culture again makes the Greeks, the inventors of the main sciences, defeat the Persians, both scientifically and politically. Greek mathematics solved the equation of the Greco-Persian wars through its genius, for an empire with a multinational force could not be defeated by a tightening military force, much inferior, at least in number and logistics, therefore it transformed the unknown of victory into the choice of land. The land, as well as the Greek political genius, brought victory in these wars, a real survival conflict for the Greeks, or the "war of independence, which the Athenian people twice wages against the Persian invader." (Bonnard, 1967: 177)

By the victory of the Greeks over the Persians, the West wins a new confrontation with the East, in the series of these "clashes of civilizations" that continue even today, at a more perfidious level of war.

**The premises of the "clash" between the Greek and Persian civilizations**
The conquest of the European West represented by the Greeks began to be a direction of Persian expansion since Cyrus the Great, the first "to subdue the Greeks of Asia" (Xenofon, 1976: 57). Lydia is the first to fall under Persian dominance. The Persian state was a colossus, especially during the time of Cyrus the Great, the initiator of Persanization, or the policy of "making Persians from the defeated" (Xenofon, 1976: 369), as well as the founder of a model army. We thus find out that the Persians were not amateurs in the field of military art, and the Greeks themselves tell us these things (which makes their victory more valuable in these life and death confrontations that marked Antiquity, known as the Greco-Persian wars). The Persian policy was shaped in such a way as to take into account the "public good" (Xenofon, 1976: 58), relying on the army, which was always involved by this: "hunting is the most effective means of preparing for war" (Xenofon, 1976: 60). From the same Greek author, Xenophon, we find out that the Persian army was very well-prepared at that time, had war chariots equipped with scythe blades attached to the wheels, an innovation at that time, with a devastating effect for the enemy's cavalry, had camels as battle platforms, dominating the spirit through order, discipline, mobility, the commander was present all the time in the midst of his troops (which ensured a high morale and cohesion), each unit knew its place and role by distinctive signs, and the military tactic "was a science for the Persians" (Xenofon, 1976: 299, 360-365).

It was not by chance that the Persians founded the first imperial organization, putting into practice a close control of the provinces by the so-called "king's eyes or king's brothers" (Xenofon, 1976: 371), actually the king's delegates acting as secret agents, supervising all that was of interest, including provincial governors, since the time of Cyrus the Great. During the reign of this monarch who "much surpassed all the kings" (Xenofon, 1976: 56), there appear the first bases of a communication institution, the post, (the Persians using the horse for a rapid movement throughout the empire, which enabled them to take effective measures), because the Persians could travel "faster than the cranes" (Xenofon, 1976: 371).

Yet, this world state of monstrous proportions was defeated by a handful of poleis, which once again proves that the Greeks' "adventure" was so extraordinary, a model for worlds and epochs. In his work Xenophon describes the Persian state under this great monarch, Cyrus, truly the Great, (surpassed only by Darius I): "The state of Cyrus is a testimony that it was the most flourishing and the largest of all the states of Asia. In the east, it was bordered by the Red Sea, in the north by Pontus Euxinus, in the west by Cyprus, in the south by Ethiopia, and although it was so stretched it was ruled only by Cyrus' will. He showed his subjects as much attention and care as his children, and they, in their turn, respected him as a father" (Xenofon, 1976: 379).

The "clash" of the Greek and Persian civilizations was multiple, not only by the confrontation of their armies, but also by the confrontation of their cultures and, impliedly, of the mentalities that were totally different, so Persian monarchy confronted Greek democracy, the paternalist view of the Persian state of the absolute leader (the paradigm of the Oriental despot, eventually, a sort of messenger of the gods on earth) faced the citizen leader elected by vote, exponent and representative of the people, who interacted even with the gods (here we have the anthropomorphic process found in Greek mythology); the very well-organized Persian administration was destabilized by the multitude of Greek poleis involved in the conflict, damaging the mechanism that made it perfect.

The fundamental premise of the outbreak of these Greco-Persian wars, true civilization confrontations, was more than the conquest of the territories around the Greeks, the Greek islands, and the interference of the Persians in the policy of these territories, the attempted forced Persanization that led to a violent reaction of the Greeks, a reaction which demonstrated their cultural cohesion.

Thus the subjugation of Lydia by Cyrus the Great, who had in the 6th century BC, the most powerful army in the region, but also by the expedition of Darius I, one of the greatest political leaders of humanity, in Scythia, an expedition ending with the control of Thrace and the Ionian Islands, to which, of course, Lydia was added, clearly demonstrated the expansion of the Persians who wanted the hegemony of the European region around the Mediterranean Sea.

Darius the First initiated the "clash" with the Greeks through his Persanization policy. The great leader transformed the subjugated territories as follows: Thrace, Lydia and the Ionian Islands into a Persian satrapy (province) with the headquarters in Sardes, and Propontida and Phrygia into another satrapy led by its satraps. Thrace was the key to the Persians' future expansion because they had made incursions in Macedonia from Thrace, and the whole Balkan Peninsula was to fall prey to Persian expansion. Moreover,

taking advantage of the political divisions of the Greeks, the Persians, of course coordinated by the visionary leader Darius I, supported various Greek political regimes and leaders (Piatkowski, 1988: 125-129, 149-150), traitors of the Greek cause, realizing what we would call nowadays true coups d'état in the *poleis* where his agents of influence acted for the policy of Persia. For the effective control of the new satrapies, Darius I built the "Royal Road", which joined the capital of the empire, Susa, with the seat of the new satrapy in Greece, Sardes. The Persian administration was very efficient, so the loss of this fight against the Greeks is very difficult to understand from the institutional and organizational perspective.

Persian satrapies were structured on three main pillars: 1. The Satrap, the governor (the king's eye and ear in the respective territory, the delegate of his power in that territory – our note); 2. The military commander (usually the general coordinating the Persian troops stationed to maintain the conquest – our note) and 3. The Secretary (with an administrative role in order to ensure the gathering of tributes and other obligations owed to Persia by the subjects or the subjugated people – our note) (Bârzu, Ursu-Naniu, 1999: 193). Moreover, the Persians had, besides this official administrative organization, an informal, parallel, secret one, especially because they had "itinerant inspectors" (Bârzu, Ursu-Naniu, 1999: 193). These real secret agents informed the King directly regarding the affairs in the provinces, and they reported about the actions of the governing provincial officials. In addition, these inspectors had the power to punish in the name of the king. The Persian king, especially Darius I, based the administration of the province on several elements, due to direct kinship, offices or material advantages: 1. "observers and supervisors (the itinerant inspectors – our note) called *spasaka* and *gausaka*; 2. his eyes called *patyaxsa*; 3. senior official (a sort of prime minister – our note) called *hazarbadh* (Bârzu, Ursu-Naniu, 1999: 193).

So the Persian administration was a complex, intricate and elaborate machine, yet it lost the unconventional struggle with the Greek poleis, the inventors of politics.

Politics is another important premise of this "clash" between the East and the West, the Persians wanted new spheres of influence in the Balkan Peninsula and from here in the Mediterranean Sea, whereas the Greeks would oppose those who attacked their very area of life, hence what is called "competitive cohabitation".

The Greeks also made politics out of this war, as great as the Trojan War, but much more dramatical, because the theatre of military operations was Greece. Through politics, the Greeks managed to defeat the Persian monarchy, their politics was the fate that decided the war between the two Indo-European civilizations with strong military traditions, their politics made it possible to select such leaders as Themistocles or Leonidas, demonstrating once again the righteousness of the theorists of war: "War is just a continuation of politics by other means ... war is an act of violence and there are no limits in its use; so each party imposes its law on the other... and the crushing of the opponent is the natural objective of the military action ..." (von Clausewitz, no year: 1) The Greeks, who were fighting at home in this clash of civilizations, had on their side not so much the "river" and the "branches", but especially the land and the sea.

**Conflict development: armies, battles, tactics and leaders**

The "clash of civilizations" (Persian versus Greek) had two major armed episodes, which we call the Greco-Persian wars, the first such war, considered to be the conquest expedition of Darius I, a victory of the Orient, but especially the second Greco-Persian war when the Greeks rejected the invading Persians, and moreover, liberating their territories within their cultural area. We believe that the first Greco-Persian war was naturally won by Persia, especially because of the vision of the supreme commander at that time, Darius I, "an army commander rather than a state man" (Montanelli, no year: 95). Darius the First was a man of empire, not a simple state man, though he modestly called himself king. So the first Greco-Persian war was won by the Persians thanks to the political-military leader, the visionary who was Darius. The Persian leader and staff headquarters that surrounded him made Persia add new satrapies, which he linked by a miracle, unregistered as such, unfortunately, the "Royal Road". This was the "path" of Darius, the military leader who had virtually won by himself, his son, Xerxes did not inherit this leadership capacity, which is why he was repeatedly defeated. Wars are won not only by the force, number and tactics of the armies, but also by the leaders who had what is called the "political goal" (von Clausewitz, no year: 13), Darius the First having a hegemonic political goal, "to force the adversary to fulfill his wish" (von Clausewitz, no year: 9), namely to subdue all in the Balkan Peninsula and beyond to Persia. The Persians had through Darius one of the "main moral forces ... the talents of the high commander" (von Clausewitz, no year: 77).

The Greeks were victorious in the second Greco-Persian war, especially since the enemy was no longer commanded by Darius, but by one without a vision, Xerxes, who allowed them to speculate, in the absence of this number they counted on all the "main moral forces ... the talents of the high commander, the military virtue of the army and its national feeling" (von Clausewitz, no year: 77). If the Persians had Cyrus the Great and Darius I at the beginning of these confrontations, the Greeks benefited from the talents of such commanders as Miltiades, Themistocles and the king of Sparta, Leonidas.

The Persian army was in fact a multinational one, in both Greco-Persian wars, but especially in the second. Besides the elite unit of the 10,000 immortals, Persian aristocrats by excellence armed to the teeth (a huge number as a military troop not only in those days, but even today), cavalry with the latest military technologies implemented even by Cyrus the Great, (the scythed war chariots and the camels), infantry (a very large and multinational one of all Persian satrapies), fleet (Phoenician especially because Phoenicia had been subjugated by the Persians). Why did this army lose the fight? We believe that the reason was the lack of talent of the supreme commander, Xerxes, especially since the Persians could only win through the 10,000 immortals trained as an elite of the army. The battle tactic was excellent, at least at the time of Cyrus the Great, "the military tactic was for the Persians a science" (Xenofon, 1976: 360-365), the army was well organized, each unit had a distinctive sign, the commander was always in the middle of the soldiers he commanded, and his mobility was great (Xenofon, 1976: 360-365).

The Greeks did not have, except for Sparta, too much appetite for the army. Besides, Athens did not have a professional army like that of Sparta. *Efebia*, the