

SYLVIA A. MATHESON *Persien. Ein archäologischer Führer*. Stuttgart, P. Reclam, 1980. 442 pp., 120 illus. and 9 maps (paper).

The Greeks gave the name Persia to Iran, after Persis, the southwest province of the country, from which the Achaemenids, the kings who threatened the very existence of Greece, came. After the Persians' entry into the world of Greek history, and we all know of the battle of Marathon and the cultural changes that Alexander the Great brought to the ancient Orient, western man has never lost interest in Persia.

Today earthquakes, political changes, unrest and wars which threaten to annihilate what time has left, have brought Iran into our everyday life. Closer at home, the outstanding Alexander Exhibition in the Royal Ontario Museum at Toronto this year has made us aware of the perils that threaten the great Persian archaeological sites and of the complications confronting the daring traveller who would like to follow the steps of Alexander the Great.

The present book comes to us at an appropriate time. It is not a mere translation of the second English edition (1976) but a new version with several corrections and improvements including the description of the Museum in Teheran in its new arrangement.

After an informative introduction and a useful glossary of Persian names and terms, this archaeological guide takes us to a grand tour of Iran. Starting from Teheran, we move to the north, the area of the Caspian sea, then north-west to the USSR and Turkish borders, an area with splendid monuments that once belonged to Christian Armenia; we proceed south to the Persian Gulf, then to the Central Iran and north-east to the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The author – who has not left a

stone unturned in the country – moves easily from the earliest Neolithic remains, the rich finds of the Elamite period, the Persians of the Greek era, down to the Parthians, the Sassanians and Islam. Descriptions are brief but accurate. Controversial questions are put aside. Every care has been taken to help the traveller. He is even told at what time of the day the light conditions would produce a good photograph. He is supplied with maps, tables, plans, illustrations, and the publishers have used print setting 'devices' for the same purpose.

The material is vast and rich and we should not ask for more than what we have been given. And yet for some readers this book would not have made a friendly, imaginary companion. We are not objecting so much to the dry style of writing, but we regret the lack of sparkles which could have set our imagination afire. Here we can only suggest few examples. When we visit the 'Black Church' of St. Thaddaeus in Azerbeidjan and we are told about king Abgar at Edessa (p. 90), there is not a single mention of the Mandylion of Edessa, the 'first' icon of Christ not made by human hands. The historical problems of this icon have been recently revived in the controversy surrounding the shroud of Turin. In Bisotum, where we move towards a statue of Heracles, an important inscription referring to King Darius and a cave with remains of settlement of the Neanderthal man (p. 149), we are not given the slightest help in order to appreciate the Darius' relief. If we are not aware of the artistic conventions of Persian art we shall never understand the stunning profiles of all represented figures. The portraits on the stucco decoration of the Sassanian Palace in Tepe Hisar (in the area of Khorassan, p. 285) from the sixth century A.D. are striking for their frontality and stylization. Surround-

ed by Sassanian palmettes staring with wide open eyes, they remind us of the Greco-Roman funerary portraits, the sculptures of Palmyra and Byzantine saints. How more exciting this guide would have been if such 'vignettes' could have been dispersed in the narrative!

But we do appreciate the archaeologist's descriptions. In few lines the traveller has the facts about the monuments of Susa where some masterpieces of Babylonian civilization have been found – the code of Laws by Hammurabi, now in the Louvre, is the most celebrated one. It was in Susa that Alexander organized and celebrated the mass marriage of 10,000 Greeks to an equivalent number of Persians girls. And when we consider that the literature on Persepolis fills an entire library, we appreciate what the author has given us. The 'optical' description of the south side of the east staircase of Apadana (The Audience Hall, p. 308, fig. 91) is very useful. Here we can identify, as in a film, the various peoples who paid homage to the Greek king whose palaces and might were destroyed by the young god, Alexander the Macedonian.

This book gives us too much and too little. It could certainly be used as a scholarly reference book with its excellent bibliography, drawings of pottery and even of Parthian and Sassanian crowns.

In another way it is a sad book. The author warns us several times that we are not allowed to travel to certain areas without being accompanied by a guide. We wonder what is happening at present to these great sights and whether – if we travel – we find the places under the names given in this book, or are the monuments and the country roads leading to them lost for ever?

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