Episode 1\_UCL Podcast

Giovanna Di Martino

Hello, everybody and welcome to the first episode of this brand new podcast series featuring the research of UCL doctoral students into various different and exciting topics related to the ancient world. I am Giovanna Di Martino and I am the A.G. Leventis Research Fellow in ancient Greek literature here at UCL, working on the afterlife of Greek drama, particularly in the US and in Italy – and I'm also working on the translation of Greek drama for the stage from a theatre perspective. And I'm joined today by Mateen Arghandehpour, co-host of this podcast series, and Sofia Bongiovanni, who is the producer of this series. So the idea that has prompted the start of this podcast series is that we've been messing talking to each other, and discussing about everyone's exciting research in this period where we don't really have any place to share that. And we’d like to do so here in a non-specialist way. So we'd love to hear your thoughts about and reaction to each month's topic. So I guess my first question for you, Mateen, is what are you working on? And what got you interested in your topic?

Mateen Arghandehpour

Hi. So thank you for having me, Giovanna. I am a PhD student at UCL. I'm working on relations between Greece and Persia, the Persian Empire in the Greek and Persian Wars of the fifth century BCE. I specialize on the role of religion and that's what I've been doing in my three years of studying for a PhD. So you asked me what got me interested in this topic at all to begin with? And is it fair to say it was my grandma? So, when, okay, so as a child growing up in Iran, which is what Persia ended up being today, I was faced quite often, with memories of the Persian Empire, namely, the Achaemenid Empire. And in my culture, my grandma was a big fan. And she brought me up to be a fan too. Now, you know, I actually ended up ended up studying the thing and I am a different kind of fan than she is, she sometimes hates me a little bit. But that's okay. Because it's all in the name of research, and it's fine.

Giovanna

Why? Why does she hate you?

Mateen

So sometimes, my grandma keeps to traditional views of these memories of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, and actually researching it, you end up finding out the some of these are modern political ideas imbued into the memory of the fondly remembered Achaemenid people. So for example, one memory is that the Achaemenid Empire made very sure that their empire was a religiously tolerant place. Now, this is what my grandma would like to tell people. But what I have learned is that there, the idea that we have of religion today was very different in 500 BC, and there was no such thing as tolerance or intolerance in a religious way. People had culture and belief. And those two were very different to how we perceive religion, and they didn't have all the history we have associated with religious difference.

Giovanna

How exciting and interesting. Can you tell us a little bit more about the Persian Empire as a whole and its language and its religion? Especially?

Mateen

Yeah, absolutely. So the Persian Empire, the Achaemenid-Persian Empire, constituted or was made up of most of what we today call the Middle East. So everything from the sand valley near Pakistan, and India, all the way going west, towards the Aegean sea, on the western shows of today Turkey, and in Egypt, and even Libya, and to the north it is stretched so far as the Danube at some point, so stretching towards Europe, in that direction, and southwards it's held various places in what is now the Arabian Peninsula. So that's the geography of it and there is the map attached in the description of the podcast for you to have a look at but if you look at that map and overlay the modern countries that live today, you're going to have so many languages, even though like most of it is Arabic, but even then you're going to have Urdu, and various kinds of Farsi and Turkish and so many others. Okay? It was the same back then. But more languages, even if that's possible. So you had things like Aramaic, which is what Jesus spoke, by the way, you had old Persian, which is today modern Persian, you Sogdian, and Hebrew and Greek, of course, and so many others, okay. The Empire had to find a way to sustain communication across, across across itself. So what they did is they ended up making a tradition of proper communication and form of letters and official documents to be in the language of Aramaic. And that's still the case for a long time. And, of course, themselves, the Emperor himself would speak in Persian, and he would write his royal inscriptions in Persian, and Babylonian because they were the richest people in his empire. And, of course, Elamite, who were his neighbor, people, Elam, as a place was next to Persia proper, the heartland and the Elamites. And the Persians had a very long history of what's called acculturation, which means they spent a lot of time maybe hundreds of years together, and ended up absorbing each other's culture quite a bit. So the Persians learned a lot from the elements and their various kingdoms throughout history to make their own. And in the end, they placed quite a bit of their own administration, on the bases. So that's why you have three main languages in the form of old Persian, Acadian, Babylonian, and Elamite. On their royal inscriptions, where they say I'm a great king, kind of inscriptions, and in official documents, such as letters and so on, they had Aramaic, because it was super easy to write, it was super easy to learn for them. You asked me about religion as well. So the like we said, religion is a modern concept, they didn't have such a thing as this territory is overseen by Muslims. And that's one by Christians naturally by Jews, and this one by pagans, that didn't exist, everyone had their own God. And depending on where you lived in like, your cultural background, you would think that the land and the gods were kind of related. So a Greek would live in Greece and worship Zeus, or Apollo, and go to Iran proper, and think that the god here is called Ahuramazda. And the same or very similar could be attributed to the Achaemenids. The thing is, that not very much evidence survives from the Achaemenids themselves regarding religion. What we have and very important is we have surviving a cache of receipts, essentially, from the Persian capital, Persepolis, these are called the Persepolis fortification archive. And they're made of small clay tablets baked, so they're preserved, written in Elamite, because that's the administration language, as opposed to the official language. So they are written in Elamite cuneiform, which is the wedge form writing. And on this, we have a whole bunch of important receipts such as the King gave money to the worshipers of Ahuramazda to celebrate the whatever festival. So we have that. Now the thing is, we have a bunch of names and kind of feasts worshiped in honor of specific gods and mountains and rivers and deities of various sorts, okay. And this is all very good, but we don't know is how they, the people of the land regarded foreign religion. And that would have been amazing. And that's where I'm trying to look in their political interaction in Greece during a war, which is, you know, violent time, where they're essentially actively using religion as a tool to win the war. And, you know, this is the thing you would do, right? If I knew that, during Christmas, London was going to be all drunk and happy and you know, at home, I'm going to, I'm going to invade London at Christmas, right? This was going to happen, and a utilitarian way. And perhaps this is what the Persians did. So that's what I'm looking at. And this is where I'm interested in and how religion was perceived.

Giovanna

How exciting I was, in fact, I was I was precisely going to ask about the the kind of evidence that you can gather up whilst doing your research and you you started sort of answering about how exciting is is to do that kind of research with, you know, receipts and and that kind of stuff and how, what are the sorts of what are the pieces of that Didn't see you. Are you using? Or can you use to go about your research?

Mateen

So sometimes because we don't have as many literary evidence as Greek historians and Roman historians do for their research, we don't have as many books basically, it does become like a crime scene investigation, we have receipts now can we learn if that kind of thing. So like I said, the, the fortification archive is such an important source of information. And the funny thing is, because this seal documents served as Imperial kind of sign of approval, kind of things, you find them across the Empire, you find them in modern day Turkey. And that's like, what, 1000 kilometres away from the Persian Heartland. It's quite far. So you find them in a very vast kind of field. But you also find a bunch of other evidence that you, you would expect, for example, the Royal inscriptions they talked about, in those you have, what's the Emperor wanted his people and others to believe. So you have his version there. But they also have, how his adversaries or you know, belligerence, and the Greeks, and those historians thought of him, and how they, he was remembered in their tradition later, and Roman historians like Curtis Rufus, and the likes of him. But you also find so much in archaeology as well. So for example, if you find, say, the remains of the Battle of marathon, and you find a part of the remains in the Temple of Zeus in the form of a helmet belonging to Miltiades, who was the general at the time of Marathon, that's a significant discovery, you know, that Miltiades was really thanking his Gods for having won that battle. That's the kind of evidence I look at. Unfortunately, for myself, the most fleshed out source is the Greek sources. So if I can find the fossil remains of my research in these archives, and archaeology and so on, the skin and bones personality evidence is found in the Greek sources, which are, as you might imagine, quite biased.

Giovanna

Yeah, absolutely. And I think, you know, people usually are familiar with the Persian Wars. And maybe you can talk a little bit about those first, but less familiar with what happens afterwards. What happens after the Persian Wars?

Mateen

Absolutely. So the Greco-Persian Wars, as you said, are familiar in popular culture through so many different things, not the least of which is found in the films, the films 300 one and two, not my favorite films. And more recently, in this game, Assassin's Creed Odyssey, I think, and I think I watched in preparation for this. I watched a bunch of Assassin's Creed footage on YouTube. And I liked it. It was okay. It was okay. It was a bit dramatic. But what do you expect? So, the person was themselves there, you roughly start with about the reign of Darius, where he This is, by the way, roughly the beginning of the fifth century BC, so the 490s bc Darius sends an expedition to the Aegean Sea. That's the sea where you find most of the Greek islands. And he conquers these islands, and his Navy and the army inside of that Navy, appear near Athens in a place called marathon and against all odds, the Athenians and end up beating the the invaders of the Persian invaders off, and that's called the first Persian invasion or the first Persian war. Now there is a bit of controversy regarding was this radio war and how much of our war was it? What was Persia after anyway, but let's not go into any of that because it's a big, big, controversial thing, and that's for later, but later on, Darius was really mad at the Athenians, so much so that he had one of his servants. According to a Greek historian called Herodotus, he had one of his servants come to him at lunchtime and say, Master, remember the Athenians and he would get angry again at them. So when Darius died of maybe old age, we don't know, his son, Xerxes took the throne over and after defeating a bunch of revolts that he expected because it just took the Empire from his father. He started he started gathering a massive army. And I'm not saying large I'm saying massive because it was supposed to be the biggest army ever. The Greek historian Herodotus places as a million something maybe more with the retinue. That's the people following the army, the cooks than the servants and the wives and so on. But we logically can't think that the Persians had the logistics to handle that big an army. I mean, the German army in the Second World War was that big, and they had a huge logistical system, you can't really compare the two. So, anyways, the army of Xerxes people think is several 100,000 at best with the retinue and the cooks and the servants and all that. So, he gathers these people and they, they this army crosses over the Aegean so they go by land through what used to be called Thrace, and the is a very mountainous terrain. And they arrive towards Greece, through what's called northern Macedonia at the moment, or Macedon. Meanwhile, he had his Navy Cross the Aegean at the same time carrying supplies and food and so on. Now, today, this is America's favorite type of military engagement is called an amphibious assault. But back then it was novel, it was something that people hadn't really seen that much before. And it was amazing for them because they could have a huge army and not really worry about food and supply lines, which would be a bunch of donkeys carrying carts of food. The ships would do that for them. Amazing right? Problem was too many storms. So the ships were battered by the storms. Anyways, this was what ended up in the battles the famous battles of Thermopylae and Plataea. And, later on Mycale, with very famous people such as Leonidas of Sparta and Themistocles is of Athens, and so on and so forth. Some of these pointing at Themistocles ended up in Persian service much later, after the war ended, and Xerxes went off back to Persia, because some historians namely Herodotus says that there was a there was an riot in Babylon uprising even and some people say that he was away for too long, it doesn't matter what matters, he went back. And all the Greeks thought that he was too scared. And he went back with his tail between his legs. But obviously, going back, he wouldn't tell his friends that look, I lost, it was terrible. We was horrible for us. He went and said, I burned Athens, it was amazing. You should have seen the bonfire and the army that was lost. He didn't really talk about that. And now the thing is, this is all a hunch that a historian might have based on the idea of an emperor, what do you say I lost, but there's no actual source saying that Xerxes said all of this thing. So that's an important thing to note. After the wars, it's important to recognize that Persia didn't engage in military activity with Greece, in the same level ever again, until Alexander invaded. The Persian started paying lots of Greeks for military service, they hired a lot of Greek mercenaries to fight in their own wars. They had a bunch of civil wars, most important of which is Cyrus, the youngest rebellion against his brother, and later on the Persians even ended up paying the Greeks to fight themselves in the Peloponnesian Wars, there was two of them were at big power in Sparta clashed against the big power in Athens and both of their allies and they start fighting it out and the Persians would support one in secret, the other and secret against them, just to keep the fights going. And this helped them because it trained a bunch of really strong soldiers in Greece and Greek soldiers good, and at this level, cheap enough for them for what they offered. And on the other level, it kept a very powerful military house, disorganized at war, and easy to maintain. So, this is the attitude the Persians ended up adopting. And I mean, it backfired because another power and mastered on Macedon from Phillip and his son Alexander started taking power in Greece and then conquering the entirety of the Persian Empire. And that's why Alexandra is famous. He went across the Persian Empire, burning towns and making new ones next to them called Alexandria. Every time there's like 20, something of them. That's also why Alexander is not the great in Iran. But in the end, the Persians and their war in Greece ended in complete chaos for the Persians and obviously on the front line, and the back line in Persia proper, it was all fine for Xerxes.

Giovanna

Wow, how many how many exciting new things to you delve into. So thank you so much, my team for being here with us today. And for sharing your exciting, your exciting research. This has been great. So thank you again for joining us. And we are publishing the podcast with a map that you can look at and whilst you're listening to the podcast as well. So I hope we you've enjoyed it and we look forward to welcoming you for the next episode.