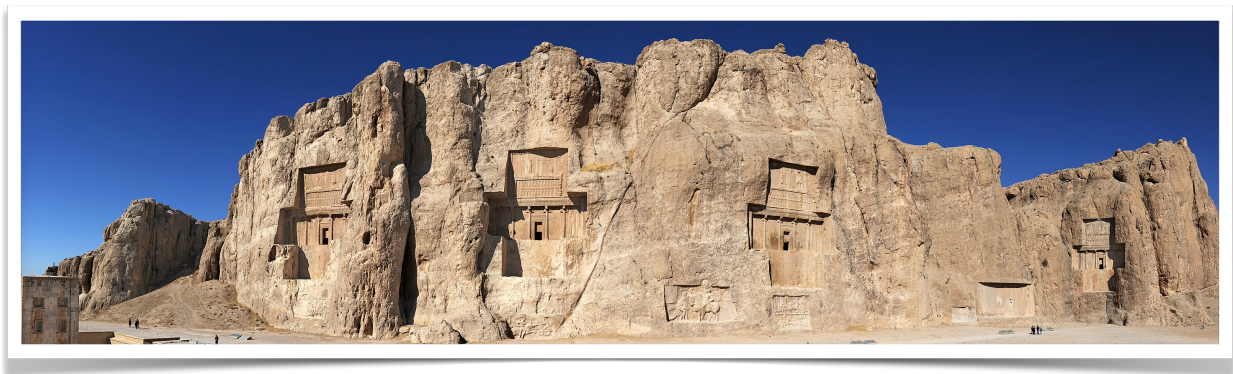


## THE TOMBS OF 4 BIBLICAL PERSIAN KINGS

(Bible Reading Archaeology)



In modern Iran there is a remarkable ancient site that has special significance for Bible students. Carved into the face of a mountain near the ancient Persian capital of Persepolis (the Persians had 4 capitals), are the tombs of 4 ancient kings. These kings once ruled the greatest empire the world had known up until that time, the empire of the Medes and the Persians. At its height, an astounding 44% of the world's population was ruled by Persia making it the largest empire in history by share of population. These kings styled themselves as the "King of Kings". Four of these kings are mentioned in the Bible.

The site is called Naqsh-e Rostam. It is a royal necropolis (cemetery) for members of the Achaemenid dynasty, the rulers the Persian empire founded by Cyrus the Great. The imposing tombs are each carved high into the sheer cliff face. The facade of the tombs are sometimes called "Persian crosses, based upon their shape. The horizontal part of the cross of each tomb's facade is believed to be a replica of an entrance to the royal palace at Persepolis. At the centre of each "cross" is a small entrance which opens into the king's burial chamber. Inside, the king lay in a large stone sarcophagus.

From the left side of the picture (above), are the tombs of:

### **Darius II**

He appears to be the "Darius" referred to at Nehemiah 12:22. His real name was Ochus and he was an illegitimate son of Artaxerxes I. He gained power after deposing his half-brother Sogdianus who had murdered his half-brother Xerxes II (the only legitimate heir of Artaxerxes I). According to the not wholly reliable historian Ctesias, Xerxes II was murdered, "while he lay drunk in his palace". Ochus (Darius II) upon capturing Sogdianus had him suffocated in ash, a means of execution where the victim is lowered into a pit full of fine ash. Once lowered, the victim gradually suffocates as he inhales the ash into his lungs. Not much else is known of the reign of Darius II.

### **Artaxerxes I**

Artaxerxes I was also known as Artaxerxes "Longimanus", meaning "Long Handed" because his right hand was longer than his left. Artaxerxes I was the son of Xerxes I. He is referred to in the Bible at Ezra chapter 7 and Nehemiah chapter 2. Artaxerxes I granted permission to his trusted cupbearer the faithful Hebrew Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem as its governor and to rebuild the city walls and gates. In addition he generously contributed silver and gold for the rebuilding of the Temple of Jehovah (Ezra 7: 12-23). His reign was generally peaceful and it noteworthy for his tolerant policies towards the Jews. The ancient sources are silent on the cause of his death.

### **Darius I**

Darius I (sometimes called Darius the Great) was succeeded by Xerxes I, Artaxerxes I and, after the brief reigns of a couple of little known rulers, Darius II. He is noteworthy for having unified and reorganized the Persian Empire. He made Aramaic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew the empire's official language. He primarily comes into the Bible record in relation to the rebuilding of the Temple. Although the foundation of the Temple had been laid, opposers succeeded in banning the reconstruction work (Ezra chapter 4). An inquiry was launched and the original declaration of Cyrus the Great authorizing the reconstruction was found. Darius then gave permission for the

reconstruction work to continue and even contributed funds and necessary supplies (Ezra chapter 6). His reign was contemporaneous with the Biblical prophets Zechariah and Haggai as well as the copyist Ezra and governor Nehemiah.

Darius I later tried to invade Greece but met with disaster at the famous Battle of Marathon. The Persian forces were numerically superior (by 2 to 1) but were boxed in on the plain of Marathon near Athens between swamps and mountainous terrain. The better armed, better trained Greek forces marched towards the Persian lines and when the Persian archers were close enough to unleash a storm of arrows the Greek lines charged, swiftly closing the gap and rendering the Persian archers useless. The Greek infantry wore superior armor to their Persian foes and further the Persians were not as skilled in hand to hand combat as they usually depended on their cavalry and masses of skilled archers. The Persian lines broke in panic and fled back to the beaches where their ships lay. Although most Persians escaped many thousands fell at Marathon and the Greeks even succeeded in capturing 7 Persian ships. The story of the Marathon runner racing back to Athens with news of victory is apocryphal. Although Darius would paint the defeat as insignificant, he would not be able to launch another invasion of Greece during his lifetime. That would be left to his son and successor Xerxes I. Further, the defeat at Marathon punctured the myth of Persian invincibility.

On the facade of his tomb is an inscription which reads (in part):

“A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, who made Darius king, one king of many, one lord of many.

I am Darius the great king, king of kings, king of countries containing all kinds of men, king in this great earth far and wide, son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenid, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage.

King Darius says: By the favor of Ahuramazda these are the countries which I seized outside of Persia; I ruled over them; they bore tribute to me; they did what was said to them by me; they held my law firmly; Media, Elam, Parthia, Aria, Bactria, Sogdia, Chorasmia, Drangiana, Arachosia, Sattagydia, Gandara, India, the haoma-drinking Scythians, the Scythians with pointed caps, Babylonia, Assyria, Arabia, Egypt, Armenia, Cappadocia, Lydia, the Greeks, the Scythians across the sea, Thrace, the petasos-wearing Greeks, the Libyans, the Nubians, the men of Maka and the Carians...”

In addition to his exaggerations (for example, he never took Greece), the reader will note the absence of Judah and Israel from the list of the conquered. This is for good reason. The northern kingdom of Israel was long gone by this point, conquered by the Assyrians and its surviving population transplanted elsewhere. The kingdom of Judah had been allowed to return to Judah by Darius's ancestor Cyrus the Great. At this point, Judah was just another satrapy (province) of the empire.

The inscription also shows that Darius was an adherent of Zoroastrianism a dualistic, monotheistic faith centred around the worship of their supreme god “Ahura Mazda” who is the creator of all that is good. He is opposed by Anghra Mainyu, the creator of all that is bad and evil. Practitioners of Zoroastrianism view everything as part of a great cosmic battle between good and evil.

### **Xerxes I**

Xerxes is most likely King Ahasuerus of the book of Esther. Ahasuerus was the husband of Queen Esther who along with her cousin Mordecai helped to foil the genocidal scheming of Haman the Agagite who plotted to exterminate the Jews.

Xerxes later tried to finish what his father had started by invading Greece. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus claimed that Xerxes marched with 5 million men (including support personnel). If accurate, this would remain the largest military force ever assembled up until the First World War. Modern historians reject this number as a gross exaggeration and estimate the army size would have been closer to half a million men. Still this would have been the largest military force to have invaded another county by sea in ancient times.

Initially, Xerxes forces made rapid progress through Thrace, Macedonia and northern Greece. In order to pass into southern Greece, the massive army would have to pass through the extremely narrow pass of Thermopylae, with the sea on one side and steep mountains on the other. A team of highly trained and battle hardened Spartans (according to legend 300 Spartans) along with several thousand Greek allies succeeded in blocking the massive

Persian army for seven days before a local resident betrayed his countrymen by showing the Persians a tiny mountain trail by which the Spartan forces could be bypassed. The Spartan defenders unexpectedly had to fend off Persians from behind while the bulk of the Persian forces advanced on them from the front. The Spartans fought to the last man in one of history's most famous battles.

Simultaneously, the massive Persian navy was prevented from sailing towards southern Greece after being blocked by the smaller Greek navy in the Straits of Artemisium. In another blow to the Persian navy a summer gale sank a third of their ships. After heavy fighting at the naval battle of Artemisium the Greek forces heard the news that the Persians had broken through the Spartan lines at Thermopylae. With no further need to protect their land forces and since they had suffered heavy losses, the Greek navy withdrew to safer waters.

The Persians forces successfully marched on Athens in southern Greece but found it burnt to the ground and its population largely evacuated. Now only the isthmus of Corinth lay outside of Persian control. The battered Greek navy had retreated to the Straits of Salamis and the vastly larger Persian navy was lured into the confined space of the straits after them. In the tight straits, the numerically superior navy was too confined to manoeuvre and the Persian ships became effectively log-jammed. The smaller Greek navy took advantage and were able to sink between 200 to 300 Persian vessels. It was a decisive naval victory for the Greeks. Xerxes was concerned that his army would become trapped on the Greek mainland and so retreated back to Persian territory along with the bulk of his army. Xerxes personally selected a smaller Persian force to remain behind and finish the work of conquest. The following year, this remaining Persian force was beaten in battle. This effectively ended the Persian attempts to conquer the Greek mainland. Ultimately Xerxes' military campaign was a disaster from which the Persian empire would never fully recover.

In the book of Esther, a Persian official named Haman who served for a time as Ahasuerus' (Xerxes I) prime minister offers the king a massive bribe if he would agree to an extermination order against the Jews. He offers Ahasuerus 10,000 silver talents. A "talent" of silver was not a denomination but rather a weight measurement equalling about 20 kilograms (approximately 44 pounds). This bribe would be worth tens of millions of dollars today. This bribe may have been especially tempting to Ahasuerus because this would have taken place before the invasion of Greece but at a time that preparations were actively being made for it. Haman would have known that fielding such an enormous army would have been terribly expensive and his bribe may have helped to fund it.

### **The Royal Cemetery Is Looted**

In a stunning reversal of fortunes, over a century later it would be Greece invading Persia. Alexander the Great led his army on a campaign of conquest deep into the Persian empire. Upon reaching the ceremonial capital of Persia he allowed his men to pillage and burn the royal city of Persepolis which was only 12 kilometres (7.4 miles) away from the royal necropolis at Naqsh-e Rostam. This was in spite of the fact that Persepolis had surrendered peacefully. This was a change of policy for Alexander and shows that he was not above committing an atrocity when it was expedient. Up till this point Alexander had reserved this kind of treatment only for cities that refused him as in Tyre. Other cities that opened their doors to him like Jerusalem were assured of merciful and fair treatment. Not so with Persopolis. Alexander's men demanded what they regarded as their right to plunder a conquered foe and Alexander allowed it. For an entire day Alexander's army forced their way into homes, murdered the men and raped the woman and girls. Some families threw themselves off rooftops rather than to allow themselves to be ravaged and despoiled by the avaricious soldiers. In a day they stripped Persepolis of the accumulated wealth of two centuries. The survivors were led away into slavery. Alexander reserved only the great palace of Xerxes for himself. First he systematically looted the fabulous treasures of the royal palace at Persepolis. According to one ancient historian Alexander removed 2500 tons of precious metals from the palace requiring thousands of pack animals to transport. Finally, he had the monumental complex put to the flame as a token of Greek revenge against the king who had invaded Greece 150 years before resulting in the destruction of its temples and the famous city of Athens. According to some ancient writers, Alexander would later regret this act of vandalism. It is likely that the nearby tombs of Naqsh-e Rostam were plundered by Alexander's soldiers around the same time.