



## CTESIAS

**CTESIAS** (Gk. Ktēsías), Greek physician at the Achaemenid court and author of *Persiká*, who belonged to the Cnidian school of physicians, which claimed to originate with the god Asclepius himself (Galen, XVIII.A, ed. Kühn, p. 731); he was the son of a certain Ctesiarchus or Ctesiochus (*Suda*, s.v.; cf. Lucianus, *Verae Narrationes* 1.3; Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 1.82ff.; cf. Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 516 no. 68, where he mentions his father and grandfather).

*Life.* The date of Ctesias' birth is unknown (perhaps ca. 441 BCE; Brown, p. 10). According to Diodorus Siculus (2.32.4), Ctesias went to Persia as a prisoner of war; the date is not given, and the reliability of the report itself is uncertain, though T. S. Brown has attempted to demonstrate its validity. As Ctesias was graciously received by Artaxerxes II Mnemon (405/4-359/8 BCE) because of his medical skill, he probably reached Persia after 405. Diodorus also reported that he lived at court for seventeen years (probably an exaggeration; cf. esp. Jacoby, in Pauly-Wissowa, cols. 2033-35) as the king's personal physician, following in the footsteps of Apollonides of Cos, who had served Artaxerxes I (465-25/4 BCE) in the same capacity (cf. Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 467-68 no. 14 par. 44 ); he also treated the royal family and enjoyed the particular confidence of the king's mother, Parysatis (*Suda*, s.v.; Strabo, 14.2.15; Photius, in Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 480 no. 27 par. 69). He witnessed the battle at [Cunaxa](#) in 401 BCE, healing a wound inflicted upon the king by his younger brother (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.8.26, citing Ctesias himself as authority for events on the Persian side; cf. Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 11.3, 13.3, 14.1). With the encouragement of Parysatis Ctesias showed many kindnesses to Clearchus,

one of the leaders of the Greek mercenary troops who had supported [Cyrus the Younger](#) in his rebellion against the king and had been taken prisoner through the treachery of Tissaphernes (see [\\*čīθrafarnah](#); in return Clearchus gave him a signet ring as proof of friendship (Plutarch, *Artoxerxes* 18.1-4; cf. Photius, Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 480 no. 27 par. 69).

In 399-97 BCE Ctesias served as intermediary between the king and [Conon of Athens](#), who was at that time commanding a Persian fleet in the Aegean Sea under the orders of the Cypriot king Euagoras I of Salamis. He passed letters to the king and identified himself with Conon's interests (cf. evidence collected and treated in Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 417 no. 7; Plutarch, *Artoxerxes* 21.2-4; Photius, in Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 483-84 no. 30). In this capacity he was sent via Cyprus and Cnidus to negotiate with Sparta in about 397 BCE, but he seems to have been captured in Rhodes, where he was unsuccessfully tried for serving the interests of Persia (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 484 no. 30 par. 75). Whether or not he really intended to return to the Persian court is unknown, but in the event he settled in his native Cnidus at some time after 397 BCE. It was there that he wrote his books, and it is probable that he also continued to practice medicine, for he had the cachet of having served as physician to the Persian king. No additional details of Ctesias' life (or death) are known, but Brown has put forward some hypotheses that are worthy of consideration.

Ctesias' chief literary work was the book entitled *Persiká*, but several others are known and partly preserved (see below).

*Persiká*. The *Persiká* was intended as a history of the Middle East from the founding of the Assyrian empire by the legendary King Ninus to the eighth regnal year of Artaxerxes II, that is, 398-97 BCE (Diodorus, 14.46.6). The fact that the relatively detailed, though uneven, epitome by Photius effectively concludes with Ctesias' trial in Rhodes (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 484 no. 30 par. 75), hardly a historical watershed, confirms that the author limited himself to reporting only those contemporary events that he had witnessed. The work was divided into twenty-three books (*Suda*, s.v.; Photius, *Bibliotheca* 72, pp. 35b.35ff.), the first six of which dealt with history before the rise of the Persians: books 1-3 with the Assyrians, books 4-6 with the Medes. The original title of the work is not in doubt, for it is mentioned several times in Greek sources (e.g., *Suda*, s.v.; Strabo, 14.2.15; Photius, *Bibliotheca* 72, pp. 35b.35ff.; Stephanus Byzantius), but, as Strabo (14.2.15) or his source distinguished two separate titles, *Assyriaká* and *Persiká*, it is likely that by the beginning of the Christian era a separate edition of the first six books was in circulation.



Photius' epitome begins with book 7, which probably means that the first volume was missing from the copy that he used.

Most of Ctesias' *Persiká* is lost, as is the epitome in three books made in Neronian times by the prolific author Pamphile, daughter of Soterides (*Suda*, s.v. Pamphílē). Only a few excerpts have been preserved. Diodorus (2.1-34) made detailed extracts from the Assyrian and Median histories, clearly indicating his source (2.2.2, 2.32.4). The story of the fall of the Median king Astyages and the rise of Cyrus the Great (ca. 559 BCE) was told at length (though somewhat condensed toward the end) by Nicolas of Damascus (Jacoby, *Fragmente* IIA, pp. 361-70 no. 66). Photius' summary of the entire Persian section of the work, from book 7 to the end (*Bibliotheca* 72), is sufficiently detailed to give an idea of the original work. In addition to these long excerpts there are many briefer quotations and paraphrases by various ancient and Byzantine authors, from Xenophon on, including Aelian (*De Natura Animalium*), Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae*, q.v.), Demetrius of Phaleron (*De Elocutione*), Nicolas of Damascus (Jacoby, *Fragmente* IIA, pp. 328-36 nos. 1, 3-5), Plutarch (*Artoxerxes*; cf. Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 469-84 nos. 15a, 17-20, 22-23, 26, 28-29, 32), Polyaeus (*Strategemata*), Stephanus Byzantius, Strabo, and Joannes Tzetzes (*Chiliades*), as well as in *Suda*. Even though only a small part of the entire work survives in these various fragments, its character is clear, and Ctesias may rightly be called "one of the fathers of the historical romance" (Jacoby, in Pauly-Wissowa, col. 2045).

Ctesias' work was in fact primarily a historical description of the period in which he himself lived, as the lengths of the several parts alone show: Seven books (7-13) deal with the rise of the empire under Cyrus the Great (559-30 BCE) and the period of its maturity until the death of Xerxes I (486-65 BCE; Photius, cf. Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 417 no. 8), whereas the remaining ten books treat the period from 465 to 398-97 BCE. The more comprehensive title *Persiká* was nevertheless within the tradition of Ionian historiography, for Herodotus and Hellanicus had already recognized the Assyrians, Medes, and Persians respectively as the ruling peoples of the East until their time. Ctesias did introduce two innovations, treating the Assyrian empire as a universal one and the Medes as the Assyrians' immediate followers and heirs. The devotion of three books to each is somewhat disproportionate, however, for Ctesias, like most of his contemporaries, knew almost nothing about the Medes, not even the names of their kings. He could achieve a length of treatment equal to that of the Assyrians only by inserting skillfully circumstantial romances, like the

story of the enmity between the Persian Parsondas and the Babylonian Annaros, or Nanybros (mentioned in Athenaeus, 12.530d, fully recounted in Nicolas, in Jacoby, *Fragmente* IIA, pp. 331-35 no. 4), which supposedly led to war between the Medes and the Cadusians (see [cadusii](#); Diodorus, 2.33; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 450-51. no. 5 par. 33), or the magnificent love story of the Median Stryangaeus and the Saka Queen Zarinaea (related in detail by Nicolas, in Jacoby, *Fragmente* IIA, pp. 335-36 no. 5; cf. Ctesias, in Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 451-54 nos. 7, 8a-b) during the Scythian war (cf. Diodorus 2.34.1-5; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 450-51. no. 5 par. 34). The Assyrian books themselves were little more than minute descriptions, on one hand, of the rule of Ninus (the eponymous founder of Nineveh, which Ctesias located on the Euphrates; Diodorus, 2.3.2), who is simply a copy of Herodotus' Sesostris and, on the other, of the collapse of the Assyrian empire under King Sardanapalus thirty generations later (Diodorus, 2.21.8, 2.23.1-28.8), a number that agrees fairly well with the cuneiform records (cf. Goossens; Drews, 1965, pp. 138ff.).

The preeminent figure in *Assyriaká* is actually the mythical Assyrian queen Semiramis; Ctesias recounts at length (cf. Eilers, 1971) the story of her youth and love, her foundation of Babylon (a city that Ctesias must have seen) and other towns, and such other accomplishments as construction of bridges, roads, and canals and the conquests of Egypt and Ethiopia (thus transposing the victories of [Cambyses](#), back to mythical times). Ctesias also credited Semiramis with an expedition against Media; Diodorus (2.13.1-2) reported that she came to Mount Bagístanon ([Bīsotūn](#)), encamped there, laid out a large park (*parádeisos*) around a great spring, and had carved on the cliff a relief of herself together with an "inscription in Assyrian letters," obviously referring to the famous relief and trilingual cuneiform inscriptions of Darius the Great (522-486 BCE; see [bīsotūn iii](#)). Furthermore, she is said to have laid out another park with sumptuous buildings at Chaúōn in Media (Diodorus 2.13.3), to have cut an easy road to Ecbatana through the Zagros mountains (Diodorus 2.13.5), and much more.

Although G. Goossens has tried to demonstrate that Ctesias' work on Assyrian history has some basis in fact, it generally does not conform to what is known from cuneiform sources and archeological remains; the author even seems to have believed that the Assyrian empire encompassed the same territory as that of the Achaemenid empire under his patron, Artaxerxes II. It should not be forgotten, however, that he was interested in the Assyrian empire primarily as a predecessor to that of the Persians and that his history, presumably based



on what he heard from Persian informants, is of importance primarily as a reflection of their view of the past.

The same imbalance discernible in the Assyrian and Median books seems to have characterized the rest of *Persiká* as well, for of seventeen books five (books 7-11) dealt with Cyrus, the founder of the Persian empire, already a mythical figure about whom Ctesias could embroider at will. Another four or five books (books 19-22 or 23) were devoted to the first eight regnal years of Artaxerxes II, which Ctesias himself had witnessed; book 23 also contained a description of the road from Ephesus to Bactria and India and a partial list of rulers from Ninus and Semiramis to Artaxerxes II (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 484 nos. 33, 33a). Only seven books (books 12-18) were devoted to the 125 years from the death of Cambyses (522 BCE) to the end of Darius II Nothus' reign (424-05/4 BCE). Even within this section the imbalance persisted. Book 13 ended with the death of Xerxes I in 465 BCE (according to Photius, in Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 417-18. no. 8), and it is clear that the whole period of Cambyses, Darius 1, and Xerxes I (that is, 529-465 BCE), which included the Persian wars, was treated in only two books, whereas four were devoted to Artaxerxes I and one to Darius II.

Ctesias' overall approach is puzzling, especially as he seems to have had no interest in Greco-Persian relations; the conquest of the Ionian Greeks by Cyrus and his generals, the Ionian revolt under Darius I, and the Peloponnesian War, in which the Persians repeatedly intervened in Greek affairs, were apparently not even mentioned. His account of Xerxes' invasion of Greece in 480 BCE was "little more than a string of absurdities" (Bigwood, 1978, p. 33), in which Ctesias passed from the fight for Thermopylae directly to the battle of Plataea in 479 BCE (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 463 no. 13 pars. 27-28) and, in a famous chronological blunder, relegated the naval operations and the Greek triumph at Salamis (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 463 no. 13 par. 30) to an appendix; these errors are clearly those of Ctesias himself and not of Photius. In addition, Plutarch characterized Ctesias as *philolákōn* "friend of the Spartans" (*Artaxerxes* 13.7), and the accounts in *Persiká* do reflect a pro-Spartan bias. F. Jacoby (in Pauly-Wissowa, XI/2, cols. 2044-45) complained that, though Ctesias reported every harem intrigue at the Persian court in detail, the great historical struggles with the Greeks were treated as negligible and accused him even of unscrupulousness and unreliability ("Gewissenlosigkeit und . . . Unfähigkeit"; Pauly-Wissowa, XI/2, col. 2046). It is probable, however, that Ctesias curtailed his own treatment of these major events because they had

been so fully dealt with by Herodotus and he had little or nothing to add.

Ctesias' book, which was naturally intended for Greek readers, was characterized by the author's verbose accounts of his own activities, especially those involving Clearchus and Conon, and his own merits. Again and again he refers to an autopsy that he conducted or to an account that he had at first hand from a Persian witness, often Parysatis herself (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 470.5ff. no. 15.51), sometimes about wonders of a kind more typical of *Indiká*, though not as detailed as in the latter. Indeed, Photius commented that first-hand references were characteristic of Ctesias (cf. Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 417-18 no. 8). The author himself claimed "to have carefully investigated what happened under each king and to have published it to the Greeks when he composed his history" (Diodorus, 2.32.4; cf. Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 450 no. 5 par. 32.4); one of his main sources of information was the "royal parchments" or "royal leather record books" (*basilikai diphthérai*), "in which the Persians kept a written account of their old history according to a certain law." From another passage (Diodorus, 2.22.5; cf. Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 442 no. 1 par. 22.5) it appears that Ctesias did not consult these records himself, for the facts in question are said to be in the form "given in the royal records" (*basilikai anagraphai*) "according to what the barbarians say."

That Ctesias wrote his book to supplement and elaborate upon the work of Herodotus, whom he considered "a liar in many places and a spinner of yarns" (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 417-18 no. 8; cf. p. 472 no. 16 par. 62), is clear from his polemics against the latter and other earlier writers. He obviously considered that he had more authentic and reliable information. Nevertheless, he offered no new critical insights and failed to take advantage of his long stay at the royal court to gather valuable historical data about great events. He seems to have lacked a genuine interest in history, and the omissions and misinformation in his account reflect an inability to select data of historical relevance and a lack of sensitivity to motivations and causality. His eyewitness reports of court life were focused instead on an endless series of intrigues by the queen, the king's mother, and other courtiers, as well as on escapades of the king's courtesans and eunuchs. These reports are in themselves informative and worthy of attention, however, "the only good thing" in the book, according to Jacoby (in Pauly-Wissowa, XI/2, col. 2047). Ctesias' piquant stories of the harem and sentimental love were actually closer to the sensational literature of the Hellenistic period, with its appeal to the common people, than to such historical works as those by Herodotus and Thucydides;



his style was applauded by the likes of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (d. ca. 7 BCE; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 418 no. 12), who esteemed him as an important storyteller and a real poet (*poiētēs*; cf. Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 419 no. 14a.215). His work thus represents an important step in the development toward a kind of historiography distinguished by pathos or melodrama, rather than historical truth. He became one of the fathers, or at least the ancestors, of Greek historical romance.

Although Ctesias' manipulation of facts and invention of history were recognized even in antiquity by *Berossus*, Strabo, and others, his writings nevertheless served as an important source for later historians. Beginning with Ctesias' contemporary Xenophon, the first writer known to have drawn upon his work, several authors of the fourth century and several historians of Alexander the Great (Theopompus, Ephorus, and many others) relied primarily on *Persiká* for the history of the Near East. Plutarch, who had a poor opinion of Ctesias and charged him with "incredible and frenzied myths" (*Artaxerxes* 1.4; cf. 6.9), used *Persiká* as his main reference for the life of Artaxerxes. In fact, until the 19th century Ctesias' Assyrian history was particularly often cited, for he was the first author to have written about the subject; though abstruse and unhistorical, his reports were accepted as factual. On the other hand, ancient geographers like Eratosthenes almost never drew upon Ctesias' work.

It is now recognized that Ctesias' reports of the Assyrian and Median past are largely mythical, though they continue to be viewed as a valuable source for ancient myths and anecdotes, from which significant conclusions may be drawn about the understanding of ancient Near Eastern history that prevailed in classical antiquity. Furthermore, in recent decades Iranists have begun to argue that Ctesias has been too harshly and often hastily condemned by classical scholars like Jacoby. In fact, the author did provide valuable information on Persian affairs, especially on conditions within the empire and at court, though he may have gained much of his information from hearsay and transposed contemporary events and personalities to the mythical past. One instance of such a transposition is his list of Darius' six fellow conspirators against Gaumāta (Onóphas, Idérnēs, Norondabátēs, Mardónios, Baríssēs, and Ataphérnēs [probably for Atra- or Atarphérnēs]; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 461 no. 13 par. 16), which does not correspond with the more reliable list given by Herodotus (Intaphrénēs, Otánēs, Gōbryēs, Hydárnēs, Megábyxos, Aspathínēs [3.70.2], agreeing in all but one instance with that in the Bīsotūn inscription DB

4.83-86: Vindafarnā, Utāna, Gaub(a)ruva, Vidarna, Bagabuxša, and Ardumaniš). One criterion for Photius' decision to epitomize one particular account by Ctesias was that it differed from Herodotus' version. The modern reader should also keep in mind that it was particularly the incredible stories that were most willingly and fully extracted and quoted from Ctesias' work by later writers and that the complete original text is lost. It remains true that Ctesias' *Persiká* sometimes provides valuable material, reflecting, on one hand, Persian geographical notions in his time and, on the other, the prevailing mythical conceptions of geographical and ethnographical realities.

Although Ctesias' information was generally independent of that assembled by Herodotus, in which description of historical events was combined with geographical facts, he nevertheless recognized the Halicarnassian historian as a literary model and considered himself a member of the Ionian school of historians, emulating the formal aspects of their works (including book titles). Although it is not easy to draw conclusions about dialect from the preserved fragments of *Persiká*, Photius reported that Ctesias "used the Ionic dialect, if not entirely like Herodotus, in any case as to certain words (*léxeis*)" (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 419 no. 13); Photius added (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 418 no. 10) that in *Indiká* he wrote even "more in the Ionic manner" (*mállon iōnízei*). It is probable that Photius was referring not to phonological or morphological traits but only to the wording of the text. There are recognizable differences between Ctesias' precise and very simple diction (so characterized by Photius; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 419 no. 13) and the language of Herodotus, and Jacoby (in Pauly-Wissowa, XI/2, col. 2064) thus concluded that the former represents the transition from literary Ionic to literary *koiné*. One very brief papyrus fragment (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 453-54 no. 8b) of the 2nd century c.e., containing twenty-eight lines of a love letter from Stryangaeus to Zarinaea, was formerly regarded as proof that Ctesias wrote in the Attic, rather than the Ionic, dialect. That interpretation has now been convincingly challenged by G. Giangrande, who has reasoned that, because Ctesias is known to have written in Ionic, the papyrus fragment cannot be ascribed to him at all. Rather, it probably represents a translation from the Ionic original into Attic dialect by a later author, comparable to Nicolas of Damascus' translation of Ctesias' language into his own idiom.

*Other works.* Three books of a geographical work variously entitled *Períodos* (Scholia to Apollonius Rhodius, 2.1015b; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 513 no. 56), *Períplous* (Stephanus Byzantius, s.v. Sígyunos; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 513 no.



55), *Períplous Asías* (Harpocration, s.v. Skiápodes; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 514 no. 60), and *Periégēsis* (Stephanus Byzantius, s.v. Kosytē; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 514 no. 59) are known. One book of *Indiká* (Photius; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 418 no. 10; but cf. Aelian, *De Natura Animalium* 16.31; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, p. 511 no. 46a: *lógoi Indikoí*; Pausanias, 9.21.4: *lógos es Indoús*) is known. Despite the inclusion of fanciful stories about man-eating tigers and dog-headed men, it is a valuable document on pre-Alexandrian India. Finally, a work entitled *Peri tôn katà tén Asian phórōn* (About the tributes throughout Asia) was twice referred to by Athenaeus (2.67a, 10.442b; Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 512-13 nos. 53-54); it is supposed to have included lists of all the commodities delivered to the royal household from the various parts of the Achaemenid empire. Although there seems to be no reason for questioning the authenticity of the geographical work and although Photius, as well as other authors of zoological or fantastic works, quoted extensively and in detail from *Indiká* (Jacoby, *Fragmente*, pp. 486-512 nos. 45-52), it is not certain whether the book on tributes is an independent work or only a long excursus to *Persiká*; in the epitome of the latter work made by the 9th-century Byzantine patriarch Photius there seems to be no place where such a descriptive excursus might have occurred, however.

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