



SANCISI-WEERDENBURG, HELEEN

SANCISI-WEERDENBURG, Heleen (b. Haarlem, The Netherlands, 23 May, 1944; d. Utrecht, 28 May, 2000), Dutch ancient historian, specializing in classical Greek and Achaemenid history. She began her studies in ancient history at the University of Leiden, graduating in 1967 to research under the supervision of Professor W. den Boer, a specialist in Greek history.

Her interest in early Iran arose from an engagement with the classical Greek period, which has provided important and powerful, but also very problematical, images of Achaemenid history. For her doctoral thesis she set herself the task, which turned into a perennial theme, of trying to disentangle the complex realities of the Achaemenid Empire from the distorting web created by Greek literary conventions. To do this, she studied Old Persian, primarily on her own, and Iranian archaeology with Louis Vanden Berghe in Ghent. The fruits of her work appeared in her doctoral dissertation, *Yauna en Persai: Grieken en Perzen in een ander perspectief* (Leiden, 1980). The first and perhaps most important chapter was a detailed analysis of Xerxes' well-known daiva inscription (XPh). Here she argued forcefully against attempts to connect its statements with historical events, setting it instead within the context of the formal rhetoric of Old Persian kingship, which began with Darius I's Bisotun inscription (see [BISOTUN iii.](#)), in particular paragraphs 72 and 75, where rebellion is elided with rejection of the Persian king's god, Ahura Mazda. This, in effect, detached the text from Xerxes as an individual, and was a crucial



first step in reassessing the significance not just of Xerxes' reign, but the entire history of the Achaemenid Empire in the later fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Her approach is well illustrated by the article "The personality of Xerxes, king of kings," in *Archaeologia Iranica et Orientalia, Miscellanea in honorem Louis Vanden Berghe* (Ghent, 1989).

The problems raised in interpreting the diversity of sources available for Achaemenid history, the temptation to fit them into a picture congruent with that derived from Greek narratives, and the inevitable ensuing sterility in terms of historical understanding, led her to set up the Achaemenid History Workshops, following her appointment to a lectureship in ancient history at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (Netherlands). Begun in 1980 in Groningen, with a small group of Dutch (and one German) scholars (see the reports in *Persica* 9, 1980; and 10, 1982), the Workshops became, from 1983 onwards, an annual event drawing together a group of scholars from across the world and from all the relevant disciplines. Following the 1983 session, Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg co-opted Amélie Kuhrt (University College, London) to assist with subsequent meetings. Plans drawn up by the two in 1984 provided for six further Workshops to explore a series of broad themes: Greek historiography on Persia, methodological issues, the imperial presence and its imprint on subject territories, the development of the European tradition on Achaemenid history, travel writing on Achaemenid monuments and historical periodization. The last Workshop was held in 1990 at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; with one exception (1985, Warburg Institute, University of London), all other sessions met in Groningen. The organization was crucial: each Workshop focused on the specified theme (set out in an introductory note), for which contributions were solicited; all papers were circulated in advance; the one and a half day Workshop sessions were devoted solely to discussion and the number of participants limited to around thirty. The results were highly productive: the sharing of information and approaches across discipline boundaries and the creation of a network of scholars with common concerns stimulated a fundamental rethinking of how Achaemenid history might be approached. Apart from the first two, all the Workshops were published (*Achaemenid History* I-VIII, Leiden, 1987-94), with contributors asked to modify their papers in the light of issues raised in the course of the sessions. They form the first eight volumes of the continuing Achaemenid History Series, five further volumes of which have already appeared: M. B. Garrison and M. C. Root, 1996/98, *Persepolis Seal Studies* (AchHist IX); P. Briant, 1996, *Histoire de l'empire perse*, Paris, (AchHist X); M. Brosius and A. Kuhrt,



eds., 1998, *Studies in Persian History: essays in memory of David M. Lewis* (AchHist XI); D. Kaptan, 2003, *The Daskyleion Bullae* (AchHist XII). The most recent is a memorial volume for Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg herself, to which some of the participants of the earlier Workshops, students and colleagues alike, contributed: W. Henkelman and A. Kuhrt, eds., *A Persian Perspective: essays in memory of Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg*, 2003 (AchHist XIII). The fourteenth will be the publication of an important study of Persian religion by Wouter Henkelman, which he began under the supervision of Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg (“The Other Gods Who Are,” Ph.D. diss., Leiden, 2006).

The impact of the Workshops has been and continues to be immense in setting a new agenda for studying the Achaemenid Empire, which in turn has had important repercussions on assessments of Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic phase of Middle Eastern history. This is well illustrated, for example, in the numerous studies by Pierre Briant, an influential participant of the Workshops, and also reflected in the re-assessments of the Seleucid Empire by Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt (1987 and 1993). It was a tribute to Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg’s achievement in putting Achaemenid history, through the medium of the Workshops, ‘on the map’ as a crucial, indeed central, factor in making sense of the history of the first millennium BC, that she was chosen to hold the Dutch Professorship in Ann Arbor, Michigan (1989-90), followed by her appointment to the Chair of Ancient History at the University of Utrecht in the spring of 1990, and her subsequent election to the Dutch Research Council.

Although the Achaemenid History Workshops are, and will remain, Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg’s most lasting memorial, her other work and interests were considerable. She wrote a number of stimulating articles on Persian topics, ranging from a series of fundamental analyses of the pernicious influence of ‘orientalism’ on Achaemenid studies (see in particular some of her reviews in, e.g., *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 44, 1983 and *Mnemosyne* 46, 1993) to discussions of the royal practice of gift-giving (in P. Briant and C. Herrenschildt, eds., *Le tribut dans l’empire perse*, Paris, 1989), Persian political concepts (in K. Raflaub, ed., *Anfänge politischen Denkens in der Antike*, Munich, 1993), historiography (in C. Krauss, ed., *The Limits of Historiography*, Leiden, 1999), and the ever puzzling question of the Persian perception of Greeks (in I. Malkin, ed., *Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity*, Washington D.C., 2001). One issue that she addressed in two articles (*Achaemenid History*



III and VIII, 1988 and 1994) concerns the ‘Median Empire.’ In succinct terms she argued that the striking absence of evidence for such a polity equals an absence of empire. Although the immediate reactions were skeptical, her arguments have now been scrutinized by Assyriologists, classical historians and archaeologists and are broadly accepted by a majority of scholars (see G. Lanfranchi et al., eds., *Continuity of Empire(?): Assyria, Media, Persia*, Padua, 2003). In addition, she was closely involved in, and an active contributor to, the growing field of study on women in antiquity. In this sphere, an article of particular interest for those involved in Achaemenid history is “Exit Atossa: images of women in Greek historiography on Persia,” (in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt, eds., *Images of Women in Antiquity*, London, 1983, 1993), a seminal and much quoted study. She also became ever more interested in the history of food and eating, and co-edited a popular book on the subject (with sample recipes), which reached the bestseller list in The Netherlands in the summer of 1994. On a more serious note, her “Persian food and political identity,” in *Food in Antiquity* (J. Wilkins et al. eds., Exeter, 1995) is a thought-provoking piece of work, exploring ‘national’ stereotyping via ideas about eating.

Much of her energy in her last years was devoted to early travelers’ descriptions of Achaemenid sites. The Ninth Achaemenid History Workshop (1989) had already focused on this subject. Simultaneously, Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg organized an exhibition of relevant books and drawings, accompanied by a volume discussing, for example, the limitations imposed on European visitors to Persian sites by contemporary artistic ideas and conventions. This abiding interest was taken further in her involvement with a group interested in the Dutch eighteenth century traveler, [Cornelis de Bruin](#), leading to the publication of a co-edited book by the ‘De Bruyn Gezelschap’ on his journeys (*Ik hadde de nieuwsgierigheid*, Leiden, 1997).

In the last decade of her life, she also returned, productively, to early Greek history and the history of classical scholarship. Just a few days before her death, the papers from a conference on the Athenian tyrant Peisistratos, which she had organized and edited, were published (*Peisistratos and tyranny: a reappraisal of the evidence*, Amsterdam, 2000). These overturn much conventional wisdom on the nature of the early Athenian state. In September 2000, a symposium on the classical tradition, which she had been busy arranging in the last few months of her life, was held in Athens; her contribution was completed and presented posthumously by her student, W. Henkelman (“Xerxes anno 1919. The Persian Wars as *l’art pour l’art*” in M.



Haagsma, P. den Boer and E. M. Moorman, eds., *The Impact of Classical Greece on European and National Identities*, Leiden, 2003). An enduring concern was communicating these new insights to a wider public. To promote this she was tireless in lecturing to non-specialist groups in the Netherlands and further afield (e.g. Poland, South Africa, and the United States). She also wrote a brief history of the Persian empire for use in schools (*Geschiedenis van het Perzische Rijk*, Bussum, 1982), and contributed articles on Achaemenid topics to handbooks (such as K. R. Veenhof, ed., *Schrijvend Verleden*, Leiden, 1983 and J. M. Sasson et al., eds., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, New York, 1995) and encyclopaedias, such as *Der Neue Pauly* 1996-1999, *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 3rd ed., 1999, and *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (see [CYROPAEDIA](#), and [DARIUS II](#)).

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