

From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire

by Pierre Briant, tr. Peter Daniels. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002. Pp. 1196 + 7 maps, 2 diagrams, 65 b.&w. illus., notes, abbreviations, bibliography, 6 indexes. US\$69.50.

The first thing that needs to be said is that this book is not what was announced in the press release at the beginning of this decade to the English reader. This reviewer, despite extensions in its released date, awaited assuaged by its advertisement as a corrected, expanded and revised edition in two volumes of the French one volume original, *Histoire de l'Empire perse: de Cyrus à Alexandre* (Paris, 1996). Having reached an *impasse* sometime between the planning and production stage, it was decided to simply go ahead with an English translation. While both author and translator justify their reasons in separate prefaces—some of which, in fairness, are not unconvincing—it is disappointing. The translator's redeeming sop that "hundreds of Classical references have been corrected" (p. xv) and that, time permitting, more could have been achieved, namely, inclusion of recent secondary literature leaves one beguiled. Regarding the latter one knows, despite staying abreast of the field, that all published research becomes dated. But does one assume then that not all of the classical passages were checked against their sources between 1996 when an English edition was first mooted and when it finally went to press in 2002? It is all very well but not for those Orientalists reared in the (eastern) classical tradition. Be that as it may, one welcomes what, at any rate, is a stupendous contribution.

Lest the reader consider otherwise, this is assuredly the *fin-de-siècle* study on the Achaemenids. Pierre Briant, holder of the sole universal chair of Achaemenid and Alexandrine studies at the Collège de France, has performed admirably. He is encyclopaedic not only in range and depth, but signally too in the spirit of his forebears—Briant would have done Napoleon proud if called upon to prepare like Silvestre de Sacy was a *tableau générale* for the *Institut de France* in 1802. And while a reader might come away giddy at the scope of data marshalled, this is no dense pedantry: an uncharitable complaint among many an Anglo-American commentator against heavy-going European works. Briant eschews queering the historical pitch and frequently confesses that only so much can be extrapolated and thus interpreted. The narrative is, as great works of synthesis ought to be, direct and sober. It shall be welcomed by students and scholars of allied disciplines for answering a particular query; surveying the state of scholarship; considering potential research topics discernable on practically every page; and consulting its sixty-six-page bibliography as a guide to further reading.

(BW)

Reading Buddhist Art. An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols

by Meher McArthur, London: Thames and Hudson, 2004 (first paperback edition). pp.216, 304 illustrations, glossary, index

The present volume attempts to fulfil the need for a basic guide to the arts of Buddhism. This task is quite challenging, as “Buddhist art is not the product of one single, unified belief system. Nor is it the product of one nation or culture. Buddhism has a history of over 2,500 years, and its arts have existed for almost as long, weaving their way with monks and pilgrims across broad areas of the Asian continent and across seas, intermingling with the existing arts and styles of the cultures they encountered.” Exploring the complex nature of Buddhist teachings and their arts is a very interesting task, and this book helps in the exploration giving a systematised guide for this process, with the aim of leading its readers towards “spiritual perfection through arts” (referring to the 9th century Japanese priest, Kōbō daishi’s words).

The book intended to be a basic guide to Buddhist iconography and symbolism, introducing many figures of worship, explains their origins, characters, attributes and the areas they are most commonly worshipped. It also introduces the principal symbols and objects used in Buddhist context, and explores several major Buddhist sites, with information about their patrons and their principal features.

In the Introduction the author gives a brief overview of the life of the Buddha, the emergence of Buddhism as a religion and the art forms related to it, first in India, and then the spread of this religion and its arts throughout Asia.

The book is divided into three major thematic sections: The Buddhist Pantheon and Its Iconography; Buddhist Signs, Symbols and Ritual Objects; Major Buddhist Sites. Each subject is numbered for cross reference, and generally occupies two pages, one with a description and explanation of the subject, the other with illustrations (basically black and white photographs accompanied by two-colour line drawings illustrating particular aspects of the figures, symbols or places being discussed). It is also very useful in this book that it gives the names of its subjects in several languages, mainly Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese, but occasionally in Thai, Vietnamese and