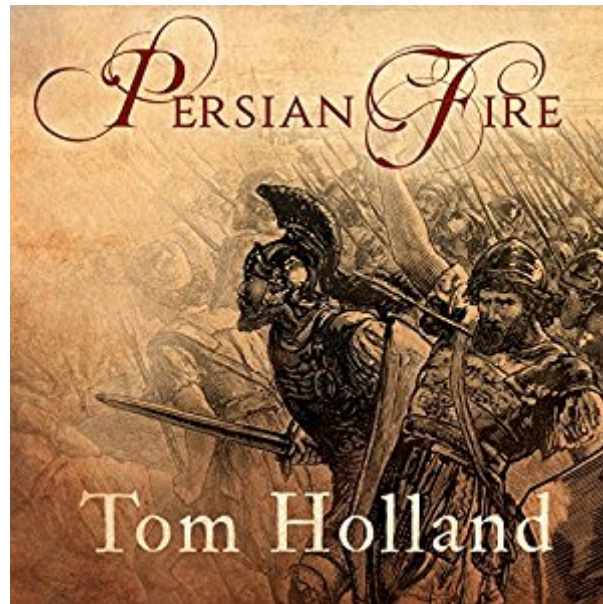


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# Persian Fire: The First World Empire And The Battle For The West



## Synopsis

In the fifth century BC, a global superpower was determined to bring truth and order to what it regarded as two terrorist states. The superpower was Persia, incomparably rich in ambition, gold, and men. The terrorist states were Athens and Sparta, eccentric cities in a poor and mountainous backwater: Greece. The story of how their citizens took on the Great King of Persia, and thereby saved not only themselves, but Western civilization as well, is as heart-stopping and fateful as any episode in history. Tom Holland's brilliant study of these critical Persian Wars skillfully examines a conflict of critical importance to both ancient and modern history.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 14 hours and 52 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: June 28, 2016

Language: English

ASIN: B01HMZ5ATG

Best Sellers Rank: #13 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Ancient #14 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Middle East #18 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Greece

## Customer Reviews

This very readable popular history of the 5th-century BC Persian Wars with Greece combines careful historical detective work with a sometimes breezy tone. I enjoyed this book probably about as much as I enjoyed Holland's "Rubicon"--which is to say, quite a lot. It is solid, credibly researched history as it might be presented by a tabloid journalist: cynical, gossipy, and salted liberally with salacious or incriminating nuggets about its many characters. It is intended for a general audience, not an academic one, and it succeeds very well. The book has an unusual but well-considered structure. Holland starts off by describing the societies of the protagonists, devoting his opening chapters to Mesopotamia, Iran, Sparta, and Athens. He does an excellent job of showing how different these worlds were from each other, and gives a strong flavor of how their inhabitants thought and behaved. That done, Holland moves on to the wars themselves, with accounts of the campaigns leading to the famous battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis, which we are

now in a position to appreciate much better, knowing something of the outlook and worldview of the different players. Holland's drive to tell a seamless story has him solving all kinds of problems of conflicts in the sources, drawing canny conclusions from wispy or contradictory data. Only occasionally does he draw attention to his reasoning; mostly it is part of the work underlying the flow of his story. And his story does flow. Sometimes I found that Holland had laid the cynicism on a bit thick. While of course the ancient world, including among its heroes, had its share of scheming, selfish, greedy, backstabbing blowhards, some of the people must have exhibited more noble qualities at least sometimes. You wouldn't know it from reading Holland. But I get a sense that all this is done with a twinkle in Holland's eye. As though taking such liberties were part of the fun available to the ancient historian, whose subjects (and their families) are many centuries past being able to take legal action. Holland's mission appears to be to make ancient history relevant, interesting, and most of all fun to a wide contemporary audience, and any peccadilloes of scholarly balance are a small price to pay for this bigger prize. Holland makes the ancient world a very human, indeed an all too human, place. The portentous theme of East vs. West he handles with a light touch. In many other ways too he shows respect for the intelligence of the reader, who, while being fed heaping portions of gossip about our ancestors, is perhaps learning more than he or she realizes. If you're interested in the history of ancient Greece, but are new to the subject, you could do a lot worse than reading this book.

Studying ancient Persia is a rorschach test for historians. Because of the vast importance of the empire, and the very difficult and scanty evidence we build our theories upon, the arguments and positions we chose to make and take usually tell us more about ourselves than they do about the facts behind the material. Was Darius a murderer who lead an assassination squad? A patriot who wanted liberty or death? A forerunner of Asoka or Washington or bin Laden or Alexander? Dig into the backgrounds and philosophy of each historian arguing for each position and you'll find that the arguments are based as much on their ideation as on the facts. Holland falls into the same traps that all the rest of us do, and in the course of the book you learn a lot about his feelings about the nature of war, the values of modern humanism, and the troubled relationship of the classically trained with Herodotus along with a lot of difficult, often questionable, assumptions about what the material really means. You will, in the course of that, get some good information about Persia and Greece and the conflicts that birthed the idea that East is East and West is West. (For further commentary on that idea in a more modern context, check out "White Mughals" by William Dalrymple.) But, for all the difficulty and questionable calls, when the book shines it shines brightly, and gives a very readable

introduction to some really difficult material. My recommendation would be to read it at the same time as the first several chapters of Josef Wiesehofer's "Ancient Persia" in order to get the most out of both books -- which do a good job of balancing each other out towards a sustainable view of the subject. Also, be sure to read and think carefully about all the end-notes. Much of Holland's best and most honest insight is found there, rather than in the main text.

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