



## Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West

By Tom Holland

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**Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West** By Tom Holland

In 480 B.C., Xerxes, the King of Persia, led an invasion of mainland Greece. Its success should have been a formality. For seventy years, victory—rapid, spectacular victory—had seemed the birthright of the Persian Empire. In the space of a single generation, they had swept across the Near East, shattering ancient kingdoms, storming famous cities, putting together an empire which stretched from India to the shores of the Aegean. As a result of those conquests, Xerxes ruled as the most powerful man on the planet. Yet somehow, astonishingly, against the largest expeditionary force ever assembled, the Greeks of the mainland managed to hold out. The Persians were turned back. Greece remained free. Had the Greeks been defeated in the epochal naval battle at Salamis, not only would the West have lost its first struggle for independence and survival, but it is unlikely that there would ever have been such an entity as the West at all.

Tom Holland's brilliant new book describes the very first "clash of Empires" between East and West. As he did in the critically praised *Rubicon*, he has found extraordinary parallels between the ancient world and our own. There is no other popular history that takes in the entire sweep of the Persian Wars, and no other classical historian, academic or popular, who combines scholarly rigor with novelistic depth with a worldly irony in quite the fashion that Tom Holland does.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

After chronicling the fall of the Roman Republic in *Rubicon*, historian Holland turns his attention further back in time to 480 B.C., when the Greeks defended their city-states against the invading Persian empire, led by Xerxes. Classicists will recall such battles as Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis, which raises the question: why do we need another account of this war, when we already have Herodotus? But just as Victor David Hanson and Donald Kagan have reframed our understanding of the Peloponnesian War by finding contemporary parallels, Holland recasts the Greek-Persian conflict as the first clash in a long-standing tension between East and West, echoing now in Osama bin Laden's pretensions to a Muslim caliphate. Holland doesn't impose a modern sensibility on the ancient civilizations he describes, and he delves into the background histories of both sides with equally fascinating detail. Though matters of Greek history like the brutal social structure of the Spartans are well known, the story of the Persian empire—like the usurper Darius's claim that every royal personage he assassinated was actually an imposter—should be fresh and surprising to many readers, while Holland's graceful, modern voice will captivate those intimidated by Herodotus. (*May 2*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Dramatizing ancient history--that is, amplifying the historical record's often fragmentary evidence with unknowable detail and inferred emotion--is always a gamble. Done well (think Herodotus), the long dead come alive, and readers are inclined to overlook their suspicions about what liberties the author may be taking with the story's veracity. Done poorly, one risks profaning history and literature alike. In dramatizing the Persian Wars--Athens' most glorious hour and the beginning of its decline into imperialism and hubris--Holland acknowledges the risks and strides boldly forward. The result is an ambitious contemporary retelling of an epic tale that, framed as a conflict between East and West, quietly subverts certain other recent histories' parallels between empires past and present. It has its awkward moments, mostly due to a predilection for melodramatic phrasing; for better or worse, its parallels to modern events are subtle and often implicit. But ultimately, one suspects that Holland's engaging narrative would do Herodotus proud--and it may even prompt readers to find out for themselves. *Brendan Driscoll*

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Review

### Praise from the United Kingdom for *Persian Fire*

“Excellent . . . Holland is a cool-headed historian who writes here no less authoritatively and engagingly on classical Greece than he did on ancient Rome in his last book, *Rubicon* . . . There is an even-handedness in Holland’s treatment of both Greek and Persian cultural riches that is rare in popular accounts of these wars.”  
—Mary Beard, *Times Literary Supplement*

“It is . . . a testament to Holland’s superlative powers as a narrative historian that he brings this tumultuous, epoch-making period dazzlingly to life, and makes the common reader familiar again with one of the most thrilling periods in world history . . . [Holland] has conquered this new territory with more power and panache than any platform-heeled King of Kings.”

—William Napier, *The Independent*

“A book as spirited and engaging as *Persian Fire* deserves to last . . . [Holland’s] real achievement is to have turned the stuff of public-school translation exercises into vibrant, bloodthirsty popular history, told with a rich sense of irony and irresistible narrative timing.”

—Dominic Sandbrook, *The Telegraph*

“[*Persian Fire*] is an unequivocal argument for the relevance of ancient history. As we stand at the start of a century that many would like to see as a time when civilizations are doomed to clash, Holland writes of a war between East and West which predates the Crusades, which is older than Islam or Christianity . . . fascinating.”

—Geraldine Beddell, *The Observer*

### **Praise for *Rubicon***

“[A] book that really held me, in fact, obsessed me . . . Narrative history at its best.” —Ian McEwan, author of *Atonement* and *Saturday*, *The Guardian* Books of the Year

“Stunning . . . *Rubicon* is unusually well-informed by any standard and impressive for its large but not overwhelming cast of characters . . . Holland keeps his narrative moving at chariot-race speed.” —*Newsday*

“A fascinating picture of Roman city life . . . In every aspect of this story, Holland expertly makes the Romans, so alien and yet so familiar, relevant to us.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“[Tom] Holland has a sense for the golden moment, is a widely read intellectual, shows a keen wit—and the result is an engaging story that the general public will find worth relearning . . . As a classically trained nonacademic he writes far better than most of those who know more than he about the ancient world . . . [He] captures the previous age in a riveting story, well told in *Persian Fire*.”

—Victor Davis Hanson, *Times Literary Supplement*

### **Users Review**

#### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Homer Douglas:**

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**Charles Powers:**

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