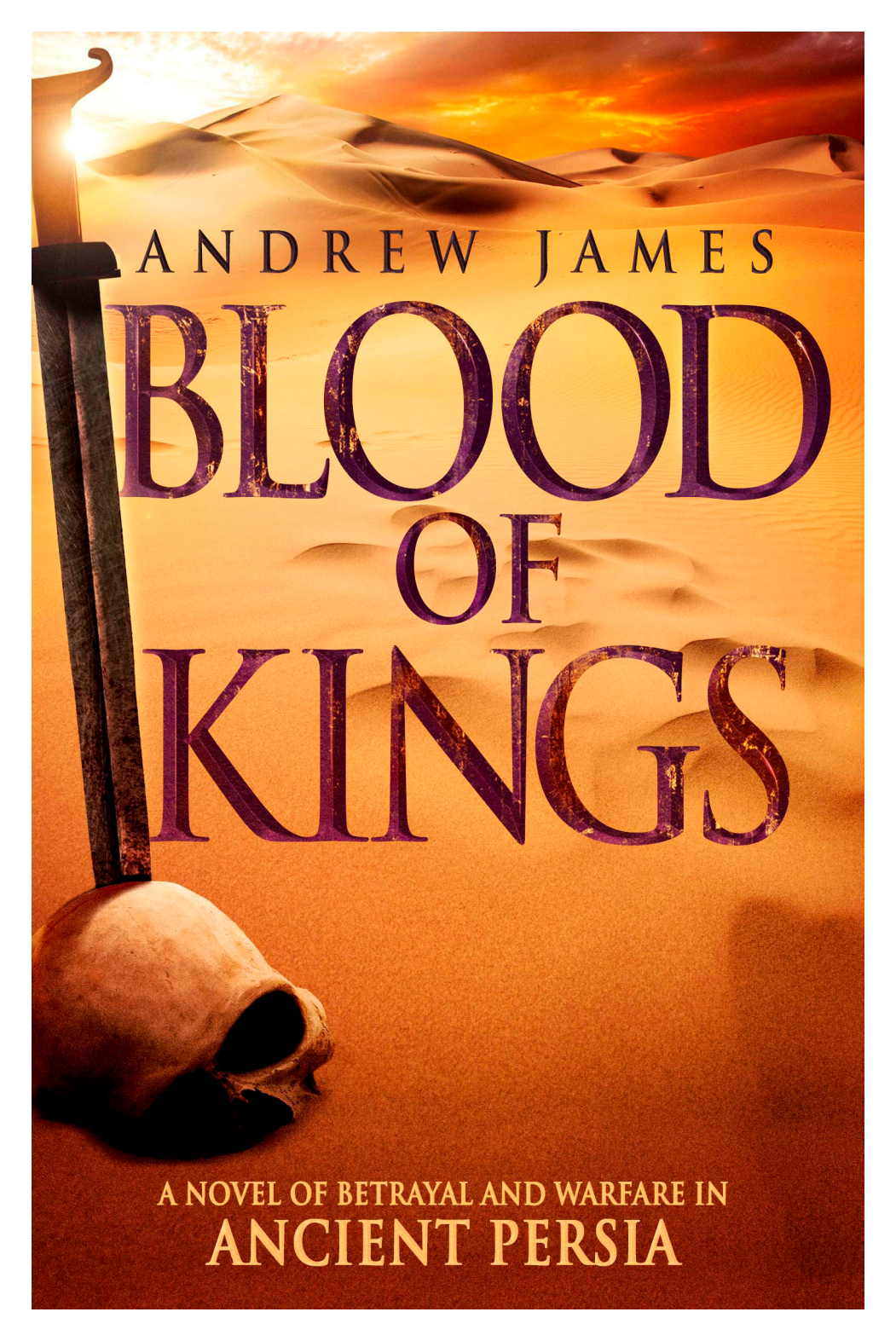




ANDREW JAMES

BLOOD OF KINGS

A NOVEL OF BETRAYAL AND WARFARE IN
ANCIENT PERSIA

PENGUIN BOOKS

Blood of Kings

Andrew James studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford University, before taking up a highly successful career at the English Bar.

Inspired by a rock-carved inscription relating to Darius on a mountainside in Iran, in 2008 he left the Bar and moved to a remote oasis in the Libyan Desert in Egypt, where he spent three years as the guest of the Egyptian government's archaeologist responsible for searching for Cambyses' lost army. During this time, he researched and wrote his first novel, *Blood of Kings*.

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

For BK, with love and endless amusement. May your
nine lives last for eternity.

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The Persians

The ancient Persians were a collection of nomadic, horseriding tribes who fought their way south from the Central Asian steppe just under 3,000 years ago. Using a new military technology called horse-archery, they drove out the existing inhabitants and settled across the Iranian plateau. These Aryan tribes were not Arabs but related to modern Europeans, many with lighter-coloured hair, skin and eyes, speaking an Indo-European language with the same ultimate roots as English.

At a time when Rome was still an insignificant town, the Persians were building stunning cities and palaces, roads hundreds of kilometres long and irrigation qanats that carried water extensive distances underground. They turned iron into an early form of carbon steel, bred famously massive warhorses, and combined the two to win their Empire.

Over a thousand years after this novel is set, Persia was conquered by Muslim Arabs, changing for ever its culture and religion. But in Darius's day, the Persians were much closer to their Indian neighbours, with whom they traded and often fought.

Many of the great Persian cities were destroyed when the Mongols invaded some 1,700 years after Darius's time, but in Susa, Parsa and Pathragada glimpses of the grandeur of ancient Persia still remain, and these were the inspiration for this book.

Of the twelve kings in the first Persian Empire, nine died violent or treacherous deaths.

BOOK ONE
BETRAYAL

Prologue

537 BC

The Nisaeen plain, Medea, in the heart of the Persian Empire

Frada kicked his horse into a gallop, the hum of insects in the clover field drowned out by the hammering of hoof beats. Holding a short bow in his hands he guided the horse unsteadily with the inexperienced knees of a fourteen-year-old and glanced up, his expression intense as he judged speed, range, angle. At forty paces it was a difficult shot and the concentration showed, his forehead creased with strain as the wings of the bow pulled back. The arrow flew, then gouged a splinter off the edge of the wooden post. Frada whooped with delight as he wheeled his horse, raised his bow in the air and turned triumphantly to his companion.

Darius briefly narrowed his youthful grey eyes, recognizing a hit but not a kill. All the same he smiled brightly, sharing his friend's delight. Then he too kicked his horse forward, heart pumping, eyes focused on the post. He urged the horse faster, his ears picking out the regular four beats of a smooth gallop. Feeling the rhythm steady he let it enter him, controlling his breathing, softening his limbs to a fluid state that kept his eyes always on the post. Much shorter than Frada but almost as powerful in the

chest, at fifty paces he began to draw the wings of the bow back smoothly, feeling the pull of the target on the arrow, waiting until all four hooves were in the air, then released. For the heartbeat the arrow spent in flight Darius held his breath, his whole being focused on the post. It juddered violently, split down the centre. Darius let out his breath, then breathed in slowly, letting his lungs expand and the heady feeling of success work its magic.

He was satisfied, but not elated. He knew he had always to be better than the others. Because one day, unlikely as it sounded, he intended to be their king.

I

November 529 BC

The month of Aciyadiya in Year Thirty of the reign of Cyrus the Great. The land of the Massagetae, or 'Ma-Saka', far to the north of the Persian Empire, beyond the banks of the Yaksharta River . . .

'There are many accounts of Cyrus's death . . . I have given the one I think most plausible.'

Herodotus, *The Histories*

They were seven days out from Bactria in a harsh, brutal land.

Darkness fell and with it came another storm, black clouds racing across a bright moonlit sky. When the troop reached the foot of the mountain where the smoke had been rising, it was Vivana who spotted the footprints. Darius called a halt, jumping lightly off his mare and squatting down to examine them. In the slanting moonlight he could see the depressions, but covered as they were by windblown dust, he couldn't tell their age. He rocked back on his haunches and considered them. Surely innocent tribesmen wouldn't be using the pass now? Not in winter. Suspicious, he decided to scout ahead. 'I'll fetch you if the

pass is clear,' he promised Frada through freezing lips. The big man on the black stallion scowled but didn't argue as Darius mounted up and set off alone along the winding track.

Sensing his horse's nervousness, Darius looked up towards the jagged peak. Scattered with boulders and rocks, the track rose sheer above him. On either side lay conical spruce trees, with a bitter wind screaming down between them. The higher his horse climbed the harder the climbing grew, ice and gravel making the track treacherous. With a sudden jolt one of the horse's hooves slipped on an icy rock. Darius felt the slide, then the tension in the muscles bunching under him as the panicking animal shifted its weight. For a moment he hung mid-balance, staring down into the plummeting valley, his heart skipping a beat, nausea tugging at the back of his throat. The terrified animal recovered its footing and stood with all four hooves on the ground. Darius steeled himself and peered over the edge, having to close his eyes until the spinning stopped. When he opened them again his men were just tiny upturned faces in the valley below. If trouble started, he knew there was no chance of them reaching him in time.

The entrance to the pass was a dark hole set against glittering ice, flanked by walls of rock. Darius told himself only a suicidal fool would ride in there alone; shadowed and sheltered, it was a killing ground. But remembering the smoke, he tied the reins to his belt and urged the horse on with slight pressure from his knees, then slipped his left hand through the loops of his shield, strung his bow and picked three arrows from the leather case hanging at his left hip. Holding two in his hand he notched the third and held

it there, fighting the tension of the powerful recurved bow. The magi said every mountain had its own *yazata*, its spirit. If so, this one was dark and malicious, it didn't want him on its mountain; it screamed at him like a howling wind that buffeted his ears, threatening to hurl him down the slope. Refusing to be intimidated, Darius looked into the open-topped passage, where the track climbed gently until it reached a hump. Then it disappeared, reappearing further on where it sloped down to the right, leaving a patch of dead ground in between. Darius narrowed his eyes and focused on the dead ground. Instinct warned him that was where the ambush would be.

Tense and watchful, he clicked his tongue. Hooves were sharp against rock as the horse followed the track up to the hump, then over it, down into the dead ground where rocky crevices were filled with dark shadow. Shouldering his bow, Darius slid his spear from its sleeve and riding to the nearest crevice he drew a deep breath and thrust down, iron ringing off stone with a screech that made him cringe. Careless of the blade he rode forward and thrust again, then into a third crevice and a fourth.

Puzzled, he withdrew the spear. There was nothing. No men, no ambush. Needing to be sure, Darius walked his mount round the blind right-hand bend, heart pounding, shield up, spear grasped tightly, eyes searching the heights for arrows he still expected to come flashing down, ears straining for the slightest warning of warriors about to leap out and attack.

Again there was nothing.

Darius dropped his guard, turned the horse and trotted her out of the pass. Warm relief ran through his veins.

Halfway down his troop came into view again, just motionless specks in the valley below. He was glad they couldn't see the sheepishness on his face. Why in the name of the Holy Fire had he been afraid of an empty pass? He shook his head; perhaps at the grand old age of twenty-one the strain of war was wearing him down. The thought reminded him of Parmys's parting words. 'Take care, my love, but never be afraid; you are special. Nothing will ever harm you.'

But then Parmys would say that, because she loved him. And Parmys lived in a palace, where she knew nothing of war.

The specks in the valley grew into shapes, the shapes into men and horses, and soon Darius could make out each individual. Spantdat, the grizzled old *datapatish* at the front, with Vivana, the only commoner wearing armour, easily visible beside him, and the remaining eighteen *asabari* in their baggy, brightly patterned gowns and hooded felt caps in formation, two abreast, spears pointing at the sky. Next were the two baggage camels kneeling on the ground, and the string of spare mounts grazing. A short distance away, like the outsider he was, sat Vinda. His showy horse, with its golden rosettes flashing like stars on the harness, had been easy to spot even from so high up. 'More money than sense,' Darius muttered, irritated by the noble's brash display. He hadn't wanted Vinda in his troop, but had been forced to accept him at the personal command of the Crown Prince. Darius had given up trying to guess why.

At the head of the column another noble was sitting on the ground next to his grazing horse, face tilted up. Darius

knew that to Frada he was just a tiny dot on the mountain-side, he could have been either friend or foe, so he raised an arm and hailed him. Frada jumped to his feet, revealing his huge, muscular bulk. A Mede of noble blood, on his short riding cloak he wore the running horse emblem of one of the Empire's proudest, wealthiest houses. Quick to laugh and equally quick to fight, when his anger was stirred Frada's towering height and brutish strength made him formidable. He was also Darius's oldest, greatest friend, a man he could trust with his life. Frada cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed. 'Why so long? We thought you'd ridden on without us!'

'Patience, brother! I found the Ma-Saka camp, captured Tomyris and single-handedly put their army to rout,' Darius shouted back, laughing. 'Now I'm thirsty. Have a wineskin ready, I'm coming down!' The clatter of hooves echoed across the valley as he cantered down the slope at breakneck speed, exhilarated now that the danger was over.

Frada disappeared as Darius passed a large rock, but when he reached the ground Frada was waiting, a smile on his face, wine and waterskins in hand. Sliding off his horse Darius clasped Frada's wrists and hugged him, then splashed wine down his throat, noticing as he drank that the *asabari* had shifted their line to face him, obviously keen to know if they advanced or retreated.

'See anything?' Frada asked casually, as Darius handed back the wine.

Vinda's eyes were on Darius now, his expression carefully blank.

'No. Didn't see a thing. But . . . I did have a bad feeling.'

‘Bad feelings don’t kill!’ Frada’s laugh was a deep vibrant sound in his chest. He turned to the *asabari*, waving them on with one of his huge hands upraised. ‘Move out! No time to waste!’

The *datapatish* signalled to his men and with a clinking of harnesses and rattling of bronze the troop fell into column behind Darius. Frada took his place beside him. Hanging back, Vinda brought up the rear.

Followed by his troop, Darius reached the spot where the slope started its precipitous climb. Above him, the moon was a huge shining orb surrounded by a halo of silver. Slanting down at an angle its light threw the land into relief, exaggerating the sharp crests of mountains and dark plunging valleys. To the north, a vast sweep of open steppe reached as far as he could see. To the south, steppe faded into patches of semi-desert. Painted in subtle shades of silvery grey, Darius felt the land’s stark beauty like a cold blade.

After a short wait to let stragglers catch up, hooves crunched on gravel and soft voices murmured as the men fell back into formation. An *asabari* cracked a joke at the last man’s expense and the others laughed. Darius called them all to silence and in moments they were climbing again, the entrance to the pass looming above them. Caution made Darius give the order to string bows and have arrows ready, but with two *datas* at his back he rode easily, his earlier tension gone. Frada was on his left talking intently, his bow clasped in his right fist, the reins held lightly in his left. Occasionally he lifted the bow, jabbing with it as he spoke. It was a fine piece with elaborately carved griffins at each end, the eyes and beaks picked out in gold.

Low voices passed back and forth as the two friends continued an earlier conversation. Darius insisted this was definitely the peak where they had seen the smoke; Frada said it was not. As they approached the hump which dipped into the dead ground, Darius felt his pulse quicken. Sensing movement from the corner of his eye he looked left, seeing the bracelet on Frada's wrist flash gold as he raised his arm to emphasize a point. Something made Darius turn further, twisting round on his saddlecloth to look behind. But all he saw was the *asabari* drawn up two abreast, the *datapatish* at the front on the right, his bow slung over his shoulder, his face watchful but relaxed.

Facing forward again, Darius saw Frada raise his bow high then suddenly jerk his arm sharply. There was a thud, a cry, and the bow flew into the air. It spun several times, moonlight glinting off the golden griffins, then crashed down on a rock, the rattle of horn and wood against stone deafening in the silence of the pass. Frada jerked his body and shouted in alarm, his chin pulling in towards his neck, his face pointing down as though staring at something, his shoulders hunching over as though taking a blow, then his body twisting away so his face was hidden. He seemed to leap from his horse, his short cloak flapping as he hurtled to the ground. Behind Darius an agonized scream was abruptly cut off. Dragging the reins he spun his horse, ignoring the whistle and rush of air that brushed past his head, and stared at Spantdat as his arms flew up. The *datapatish's* face was twisted in shock, lips drawn back, teeth bared, a dark liquid trickling from the corners of his mouth. The same dark stain slashed across the saffron-yellow scarf hanging loose around his neck. Above it the

datapatish's throat gaped open where the man's voice box had been ripped out by an arrow. Another arrow was sticking from his chest and a third from his right thigh, his leg hanging limp against the horse's flank.

Darius was stunned. It had all happened in a moment, with one withering hail of arrows, and already two other men were down, writhing on the ground. His troop was being cut to pieces, they needed to take cover. He opened his mouth to shout an order then gasped at an impact so forceful it buckled the reinforced armour at the back of his left shoulder, spinning him round and throwing him forward over his mount's neck. There was a thin, high whistle then a ringing metallic crack as an arrow slammed into the bronze chest armour of his horse. The ground seemed to plummet as she reared up. Darius jabbed his knee into her flank and fought with the reins, trying to get her into a turn but there was a second impact and she bucked, tilting him forward to stare in horror at the ground that was suddenly rising to meet him. He gripped her flanks with both knees, the muscles in his groin and inner thigh clenching tight as he struggled to hold on. Again she bucked, then reared. Disorientated, Darius felt his knees lose contact with her flanks and he was tossed into the air. Thrown forward then hurled backwards and up, his spine arching, the overlapping bronze scales of his armour creaking as the leather-backed corselet flexed to its limit, first one way then the other as his spine whipped under the shock. The armour held him like a cage, straining against its bindings and cutting painfully into the back of his shoulders. The air around him was ripped by arrows and screams as the ground rose to meet him.

Darius's last thought was that the Ma-Saka had been cunning, letting him live while he scouted the pass, drawing everyone into their trap. Then an explosion of pain overwhelmed his body as he struck the ground.