

BOOK REVIEW

Xerxes: A Persian Life. By RICHARD STONEMAN. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. xi + 275. Hardcover, \$38.00. ISBN 978-0-300-18007-7.

Stoneman's book on the Persian king Xerxes (ca. 518–465 BCE) joins several recent scholarly studies focusing on the career or historical reception of individual Achaemenid Persian kings.¹ Published earlier in the same year (2015), Emma Bridges' *Imagining Xerxes: Ancient Perspectives on a Persian King* (London and New York) is in many ways complementary to Stoneman's book: whereas Bridges concentrates on the negative portrayal of Xerxes in Classical sources, Stoneman aims to set Xerxes firmly in a *Persian* context.² To establish this context, Stoneman looks not only at Achaemenid inscriptions and monuments, but also at later writings, especially the Persian epic poem *Shahnameh* (tenth/eleventh century CE) by Ferdowsi.

The book's nine chapters (supplemented by an introduction, a conclusion, and three appendixes) together follow a mostly chronological path through the life of Xerxes. Chapter 1 details the likely usurpation of the Persian throne by Xerxes' father Darius I (in 522 BCE), as well as Xerxes' own accession to the kingship (in 486), and chapter 2 examines the Persian Empire that Xerxes inherited. In chapter 3 Stoneman reconstructs aspects of the Achaemenid court (from dinners to gardens), while in chapter 4 he argues that Xerxes took up the religious charge of his father, who, says Stoneman, had introduced Zoroastrianism as the religion of the Persian kings. With Herodotus' *Histories* as the main guide, chapters 5–6 survey Xerxes' invasion of Greece (480–479). Chapter 7 centers on Persepolis, which was in large part built by Xerxes. The two remaining chapters cover Xerxes' last years, from his amorous pursuit of female family members (chapter 8) to his assas-

¹ In terms of recent biographical treatments of Persian kings, Cyrus II (the Great) has been particularly well-served: see T. Daryaee, ed., *Cyrus the Great: An Ancient Iranian King* (Santa Monica, CA 2013); R. Zarghamee, *Discovering Cyrus: The Persian Conqueror Astride the Ancient World* (Washington DC 2013).

² For my review of Bridges' book, see *Classical Journal* 2015.12.10.

sination (chapter 9), the latter perhaps through the agency of his son and successor Artaxerxes I. In the conclusion Stoneman draws a character sketch of Xerxes, whose outlook exhibited a typical “Persian melancholy” (215) towards the transience of existence, who had a typical Persian love of nature, but who tended to be overcome by his passions.

As this character sketch of Xerxes suggests, Stoneman’s attempt to put a Persian cast on the king’s life yields some positive results, but also some negative ones. The book’s best chapter is on Persepolis (chapter 7) because it is from that site that the vast majority of our Achaemenid Persian information on Xerxes derives. Stoneman reveals (15) that by mining the *Shahnameh* for Persian traditions about the Achaemenids he follows the approach pioneered by Pierre Briant in his biography of the last Achaemenid king, Darius III.³ At the same time, he admits that Briant “had the advantage that Darius III is recognisable as a character in the *Shahnameh* and elsewhere, whereas the congruence of Esfandiyar [in the *Shahnameh*] and Xerxes is fleeting at best” (cf. 95–96, 206–207).

In order to reconstruct Xerxes’ Persian world Stoneman also seeks out more modern analogues, such as the world of the Ottoman sultans, whose customs involving harems and marriages with concubines are compared fruitfully with the polygamous domestic customs of Achaemenid kings (chapter 8). Out of place, however, in a book that Stoneman terms (viii) “a serious biography of Xerxes” are his ubiquitous citations of modern literary and dramatic treatments of Xerxes, including Gore Vidal’s *Creation: A Novel* (New York 1981) and various European operas on Persian subjects dating from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries CE; even the book’s first appendix is devoted to these operas. Such fictional works contribute essentially nothing to our historical knowledge of Xerxes and the Achaemenid Persian Empire; by drawing upon these works so heavily Stoneman continually crosses over into reception studies (without alerting the reader that this is what he is doing) and moves away from biography.

The book contains several errors, as well as problems of layout. The latter involves the book’s maps, plates, and genealogical tables: while the tables are only loosely tied to the book’s text (see, for example, 13), the maps and plates are never mentioned in the text at all. Along with typographical errors, there are omissions and mistakes in the bibliography (which, Stoneman hints [ix], he did not compile

³ P. Briant, *Darius dans l’ombre d’Alexandre* (Paris 2003); now in an English translation, *Darius in the Shadow of Alexander*, trans. J. M. Todd (Cambridge, MA 2015).

himself).⁴ There are also a few factual errors. Stoneman mistakenly calls Teispes “the father of Cyrus” (21), that is, Cyrus II (the Great); later, however, he correctly calls Teispes “the great-grandfather of Cyrus” (97). Regarding Darius’ failed invasion of Scythia (narrated by Herodotus in 4.83-142), Stoneman implies (115) that the Scythians dismantled the bridge Darius had built on the Ister (Danube); on the contrary, it was the Ionians (*not* the Scythians) who speciously dismantled (only a part of) this bridge (Hdt. 4.139). Stoneman refers to “a practice that was common in Persia but struck Athenians and others as particularly strange, namely marriage of kings (and others?) with close relatives, including daughters, sisters, and nieces” (185). While even for the Greek ruling elite one’s own children and siblings were usually off-limits as spouses, nieces were another matter, as is evidenced by the future Spartan king Leonidas’ marriage to his half-niece Gorgo.⁵ The Herodotean narrator’s own laughter in 4.36.2 disproves Stoneman’s assertion that “laughter is always a harbinger of doom in the *Histories*, because it indicates arrogance or self-delusion” (214).⁶

These errors notwithstanding, readers of various type—from scholars to general readers—will find much of value in Stoneman’s historical biography of Xerxes. Most importantly, even if our image of this particular Persian king will forever remain somewhat elusive, Stoneman has managed through a diligent accumulation of evidence to make the picture clearer.

DAVID BRANSCOME

Florida State University, dbranscome@fsu.edu

⁴ Underlined forms are incorrect. 22: Achemenid; 49: “eastern” for “western”; 52: On Xerxes’ annals; 108: Auramazda; 110: Darius death; 147: “enemy soldier” for “enemy ship”; 165: 586 for 486; 174: 479 for 480; 200: Xerxes’ took; 224: “Cyrus recognised” for “Astyages recognised”; 233 n. 33: “note 9” for “note 11”. Bibliographical errors: 251 n. 38: “Shahbazi 1976” omitted from bibliography; “Abdi 2005” for “Abdi 2010”; 258: “Abdi, Kamyar 2005” (for 2010); “Curtis and Simpson 2005” (for 2010). To the “modern accounts” of the Battle of Salamis listed at 249 n. 41 should be added B. Strauss, *The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter that Saved Greece—and Western Civilization* (New York 2004).

⁵ See L. G. Mitchell 2012: 6-7 (“The Women of Ruling Families in Archaic and Classical Greece,” *Classical Quarterly* 62.1: 1-21).

⁶ See D. Branscome 2013: 113 and n. 23 (*Textual Rivals: Self-Presentation in Herodotus’ Histories* [Ann Arbor]).

