

BOOK REVIEW

Imagining Xerxes: Ancient Perspectives on a Persian King. By EMMA BRIDGES. London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. xi + 233. Hardcover, \$112.00. ISBN 978-1-47251-427-1.

In her study of ancient perspectives on the Persian king Xerxes, Bridges convincingly argues that the figure of Xerxes received the brunt of the negative associations concerning Achaemenid Persians that arose in the Greek literary tradition after the Persian Wars (490, 480–479 BCE). That it was Xerxes who personally led an enormous invading force against Greece in 480—and notoriously sacked Athens and burned the temples on the acropolis—was never fully forgotten (or forgiven) by Greeks. The sheer range of the sources discussed by Bridges is impressive and helps make her case about the pervasiveness of the image of Xerxes in both Greek and Roman thought.

Bridges takes a partly chronological, partly thematic approach to the ancient literary treatments of Xerxes. Aeschylus' historical tragedy *Persians* (472 BCE) is the main subject of chapter 1. Other depictions of Xerxes include those found in Herodotus (chapter 2), in Achaemenid inscriptions and art (chapter 3), and in several fourth-century BCE authors (Lysias, Isocrates, Xenophon) and in the anti-Persian propaganda of Alexander the Great (chapter 4). Chapter 5 considers how both Greek sources (Ctesias, Diodorus, the novel) and the biblical book of *Esther* imagined Xerxes at court, while chapter 6 surveys literary images of Xerxes created by Romans and by Greeks (and by Jews, in the case of Josephus) under Roman rule. An epilogue looks at how Xerxes is portrayed in the recent films *300* (2007) and *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014).

What Bridges does best is discuss the particular motifs that came to be associated with Xerxes in the Greek and Roman literary tradition. Aeschylus and Herodotus were instrumental in assembling several negative motifs related to Xerxes from which later authors could choose: Xerxes' "yoking" (Aes. *Pers.* 71, 130; Hdt. 7.6.4, 7.8β1, 7.33.1, 34.1, 36.1, 4) of the Hellespont with his bridge of boats—and even his "whipping" (Hdt. 7.35.1, 54.3) of this body of water—and Xerxes' cutting of a canal through the Mount Athos peninsula (Hdt. 7.22). In the fourth century BCE, Attic orators and rhetoricians seized upon the yok-

ing/whipping of the Hellespont and the cutting of the Athos canal as characteristic examples of Xerxes' impiety, anger, and hybris; in this century, Xerxes was treated for the first time "as the symbolic representative of all Persian kings—both those before and after his rule . . . and came to serve as shorthand for the Persian invasion" as a whole (106). Along with the motif of Xerxes as a powerful (if failed) military leader was the competing motif of Xerxes' luxurious and intrigue-filled life at court; after Herodotus first referenced this latter motif (9.108–113), it was developed further by Ctesias and others. Xerxes became a potentially subversive figure in the Roman Empire: Plutarch, for example, avoided dwelling on Xerxes due to his awareness that Greek authors had for centuries depicted Xerxes as the quintessential foreign invader threatening Greek freedom (186–187).

Although she skillfully traces the development of the literary tradition concerning Xerxes *after* Aeschylus' *Persians*, Bridges barely considers the origins of this tradition before Aeschylus. Where did Aeschylus get his ideas about Xerxes? Oral stories about the war were surely told by veterans during the years following Xerxes' invasion; Bridges refers vaguely to "the collective memory" about Xerxes' sack of Athens (1). Stories may have adhered to Persian spoils, such as Xerxes' lavish tent captured at Plataea (Hdt. 9.70.3, cf. 9.82); Plutarch (*Per.* 13.5) and Pausanias (1.20.4) claim that the shape of the Odeum in Athens was modeled on that of Xerxes' tent. Pre-*Persians* sources dealing with the Persian Wars included Greek epigrams (Hdt. 7.228), Phrynicus' historical tragedy, *Phoenician Women* (produced in 476), and Simonides' Plataea elegy.¹ Aeschylus lost a brother at Marathon (Hdt. 6.114), and he himself may have fought at Marathon and Salamis; he is even said to have competed with Simonides in composing an elegy about Marathon.² All these sources and experiences could have shaped Aeschylus' view of Persians and of Xerxes.

I will briefly treat other criticisms. The ghost of Darius in Aeschylus' *Persians*, says Bridges (27), is a hypocrite for finding fault with Xerxes (*Pers.* 723, 725) that he bridged the Hellespont, when Darius himself had bridged the Thracian Bos-

¹ Bridges does refer to Phrynicus at 12 n.5 and 134. On Phrynicus, see A. F. Garvie 2009: x-xi (*Aeschylus: Persae* [Oxford]). On Simonides' Plataea elegy, see D. Boedeker and D. Sider, eds., *The New Simonides: Contexts of Praise and Desire* (Oxford 2001).

² On Aeschylus' military service, see M. R. Lefkowitz 2012: 71-2 (*The Lives of the Greek Poets*, 2nd ed. [Baltimore]). On Aeschylus' Marathon elegy, see Boedeker and Sider 2001: 4 (*op. cit.*, n. 2). See further T. Kelly 2003: 209-11 ("Persian Propaganda—A Neglected Factor in Xerxes' Invasion of Greece and Herodotus," *Iranica Antiqua* 38: 173-219).

porus (Hdt. 4.83.1, 85.1, 87.1, 88) in his invasion of Scythia; Aeschylus, however, may simply have possessed no knowledge of Darius' Scythian invasion.³ In Attic vase-paintings Greeks battling Persians are not "depicted as fighting naked" (133) until ca. 460 BCE; earlier in the century (490–470) the Persians' Greek opponents wear full hoplite armor.⁴ Bridges is inconsistent throughout in speaking of a single "tradition" or of multiple "traditions" relating to Xerxes and his invasion (e.g., 151: "Persian Wars tradition"; 152: "Persian Wars traditions"; 173, 180 n.82: "Xerxes-tradition"; 187, 191: "Xerxes-traditions"). The book contains a number of typographical errors.⁵

These points aside, Bridges well demonstrates the remarkable longevity that the ideologically-charged figure of Xerxes enjoyed in Greek and Roman literature over a span of almost a thousand years. One of the most valuable aspects of Bridges' book is its marshalling of such a great variety of Greek and Roman texts that deal with Xerxes. The usefulness of the book would be improved, therefore, if it were equipped with an index of passages cited, rather than just a general index.

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³ As C. Tuplin 2010: 284 ("Revisiting Dareios' Scythian Expedition," in J. Nieling and E. Rehm, eds., *Achaemenid Impact in the Black Sea: Communication of Powers* [Aarhus] 281-312).

⁴ See M. C. Miller 2010: 131-33 ("Imaging Persians in the Age of Herodotus," in R. Rollinger, B. Truschneegg, and R. Bichler, eds., *Herodotus and the Persian Empire* [Wiesbaden] 123-57).

⁵ Underlined forms are incorrect. 3: his Greece; 17: κατ; 34: Ἄσια; 39: βασιλέυς; 43: upon on; 54: here account; 57: 7.8.β2 for 7.8β1; 7.46.1 for 7.36.1; 64: "[if] of all" for "if of [all]"; 83: "Xerxes' moderation" for "Darius' moderation"; 90: "record" for "recorded"; 109: echoes; 121: explored of; 129n.5: αἰαῖ; 147: to reassures; 197: that that.