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BOOK REVIEW

Emma Bridges: Imagining Xerxes: Ancient Perspectives on a Persian King

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The figure of Xerxes emerges from several cultural traditions – Persian, Greco-Roman and Jewish – whether in his guise as magnanimous and divinely favoured King of Kings, sacrilegious barbarian invader, symbol of the transience of human fortune or pious benefactor of the Jewish people. Emma Bridges's *Imagining Xerxes* is an impressive synthesis of a largely unexplored topic, full of acute analysis and beautifully illustrated with six bespoke drawings by Asa Taulbut. It will be invaluable for anyone with an interest in the ancient and modern reception of Achaemenid Persia.

In the near total absence of reliable evidence for Xerxes's personality and intimate biography, Bridges's focus is on how the 'Xerxes-figure' is time and again recycled for new literary, pedagogical and political purposes, particularly within the Greco-Roman world. These Xerxeses are mostly accepted to be imaginative elaborations on a minimal factual armature, which itself varies according to the nationality of the author. As Bridges observes, even Persian epigraphic sources which purport to give a detailed description of the Great King's personal virtues and character are heavily formulaic – in some cases verbatim copies of similar inscriptions given out by Darius. As such, they too give us very little idea of the nature of the man himself. Bridges's task, then, recalls that shouldered by Pierre Briant in *Darius in the Shadow of Alexander* (2003, in English 2015): an exercise in an enigmatic Achaemenid monarch's literary afterlife.

Bridges tracks her subject tenaciously through what survives of the ancient material and discusses an impressive range of evidence: some three-dozen Persian, Greek, Jewish and Roman sources, both literary and visual, most dating to the six

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centuries following Xerxes's accession in 486 BCE. The space devoted to each source is generally in proportion to its treatment of Xerxes and its importance in the subsequent tradition. The two most famous Xerxes portraits of Greek literature are thus given their own chapters: Ch. 1, 'Staging Xerxes: Aeschylus and Beyond' (also discussing Timotheus) and Ch. 2, 'Historiographical Enquiry: the Herodotean Xerxes-Narrative'. An entire chapter is then devoted to Achaemenid sculpture and epigraphy, focusing on material produced in the reigns of Darius and Xerxes (Ch. 3, 'Xerxes in his Own Write? The Persian Perspective'). After this sources are grouped by a combination of theme and time-period, producing: Ch. 4, 'Pride, Panhellenism and Propaganda: Xerxes in the Fourth Century BC' (featuring *inter alia* Lysias, Isocrates, the view of the Achaemenid Empire in Xenophon and Plato, and Alexander the Great's exploitation of the Persian Wars narratives); Ch. 5, 'The King at Court: Alternative (Hi)Stories of Xerxes' (Ctesias, Greek vase paintings, Diodorus, the Book of Esther, Chariton and Philostratus); Ch. 6, 'The Past as Paradigm: Xerxes in a World Ruled by Rome' (discussing Roman rhetoric, Josephus, Polybius, Strabo, Pausanias, Plutarch and Juvenal). Finally, an epilogue focuses primarily on Zack Snyder's film *300* and its sequel *300: Rise of an Empire*. Given the breadth of this material, readers will be grateful to discover that Bridges uses concise and elegant prose and has a facility for swift but comprehensive introductions.[1]

Probably the most significant story that the book has to tell is the striking developments in the Greco-Roman tradition: how the elaborate Xerxeses of the 5th century BC are pared down to produce Xerxes 'the negative exemplum *par excellence*' (p. 165). As a symbol of arrogant barbarian tyranny, Xerxes is wheeled out in ever-changing contexts by rhetoricians keen to use the past in the service of current political interests (most obviously in the case of Isocrates's Panhellenic warmongering) or as an exemplum in philosophical or pedagogical literature. The catalogue of vices he exemplifies in Valerius Maximus – lust, luxury, destructiveness, ambition, arrogance, lack of restraint – and the names bestowed on him by Roman authors – *insolens barbarus* (elder Seneca), *stolidus ille rex* (the younger Seneca) or the simple *barbarus* of Juvenal's 10th *Satire* – give a flavour of the use made of the Xerxes figure in moralizing Roman literature.[2] There is also a less popular tradition, taking its cue from Herodotus's dialogue between Xerxes and Artabanus at Abydos, in which Xerxes symbolizes the mutability of all human fortune.

One of the work's great strengths is its analysis of the Aeschylean and Herodotean portraits of Xerxes and its ability to juxtapose these with the simplified

[1] This is perhaps the moment to add that the book has been carefully copy edited, with only a handful of typos or oddities in its 199 pages that I have spotted: p. 43 'upon [on]'; p. 51 'Sperchias' is a hybrid of the forms used by Herodotus (Sperthias) and Plutarch/Lucian (Sperchis); p. 54 'here <the> account'; p. 93 '*daiva <s>*'; p. 220 'Saïd' (but 'Said' on p. 12, n. 3).

[2] To jump to a later period, this is the Xerxes who reappears in Reformation historiography, where Persian narratives begin to be retold – this time with markedly more emphasis on the Bible – and where Xerxes again appears consistently as a negative exemplum. See B. A. Ellis '*Herodotus Magister Vitae*: Herodotus and God in the Protestant Reformation', in *God in History: Reading and Rewriting Herodotean Theology from Plutarch to the Renaissance*, ed. id., *Histos* Supplement 4, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2015, pp. 171–245.

Xerxeses of later times. The first chapter explores how Xerxes's presentation develops in the course of Aeschylus's *Persians*, from the Chorus' first evocations of the powerful god-like warrior to the king's final appearance on stage in rags. The interest in the figure of Xerxes centres the chapter on a novel axis, rather than dwelling on vexed questions like whether the play is sympathetic to the Persians or chauvinistic anti-barbarian propaganda (judged sagely on p. 35). Bridges shows that prior to Xerxes's arrival on stage, 'every character has… presented us with their own imagined version of the king' (p. 31), and examines each of these in detail, before discussing the final appearance of the king himself on stage.

The chapter on Herodotus is particularly valuable. A startling proportion of Herodotean scholarship, seeking to elucidate the work's presumed didactic message, continues to offer Herodotus's Xerxes (alongside the other monarchs or tyrants in the *Histories*) as the paradigmatic exemplum of the cruel, imperialist, volatile tyrant, whose defeat shows that arrogance and impiety eventually receive their just deserts. Bridges discusses the several aspects of Herodotus's Xerxes which are, to a greater or lesser degree, amenable to this negative reading of his character; but, for her, this approach to Xerxes remains the 'Athenian version' (i.e., that voiced by Themistocles, VIII.109.3); by contrast 'the Herodotean explanation' for Xerxes's defeat is the inevitable transience of human fortune. Accordingly, Bridges pays more attention to the frequently neglected positive traits of Herodotus' Xerxes: a king who occasionally occupies the 'moral high-ground', one well aware of the fragility of human fortune and the limits of human knowledge; a king motivated to invade Greece by a combination of reasonable considerations and harsh divine compulsion, who often seems to seek to make amends for prior excessive behaviour; a king whose beauty and size mean that no one was more worthy to wield power. Most importantly, Xerxes's misfortunes are not only a satisfying spectacle of imperial magnificence humbled, but symbolic of the pitiable nature of the human condition. Building on more nuanced readings of Herodotean monarchs in recent years, Bridges is at pains to show that Herodotus does not provide us with a simple, chauvinistic reading of Xerxes, but rather a complex portrait used 'to exemplify one of the underlying ethical premises of his work—that human fortune does not reside for long in one place' (p. 4; cf. 64).

Much (though by no means all) of the remainder of the book could be viewed as an exploration of the reception of these two great Xerxes narratives of the fifth century. We repeatedly see the debut of scenes or motifs that take on great importance in the subsequent tradition. Whether Aeschylus was the first to have Xerxes place a yoke (ζυγόν) on the sea (p. 15), or how many Greeks before Herodotus associated Xerxes with the harem intrigue of an exotic court (pp. 70–71), remains unknown (and Bridges is suitably cautious) – but these are likely to be the source of these images in many later works, and it is useful to have the extant genealogy of specific aspects of Xerxes's portrayal traced (e.g., pp. 15, 23). Many anecdotes (particularly the Herodotean ones) are recycled in the historiographical, rhetorical and moral works of the Roman world: Polybius relates the story of Xerxes's Persian ambassadors thrown down the well (in Herodotus, the ambassadors came from Darius, VII.133.1); the Plutarchian *Apophthegmata* tell the story of Xerxes's humbling of the Babylonians by inflicting womanly trades upon them (a

story associated with Cyrus and the Lydians at Herodotus I.156); a consolation letter by the younger Pliny recycles the Herodotean story of Xerxes's tears at Abydos after he contemplates the brevity of human life; the younger Seneca used the story of Xerxes's execution of Pythius's son to illustrate the evils of excessive anger. Bridges shows how time and again Xerxes acts as a lodestone for stories previously attached to other Achaemenid monarchs, often (as already in Aeschylus) stealing the spotlight from Darius, so as to become 'embedded in the collective Greek consciousness as the archetypal wicked barbarian king' (p. 60). She discusses numerous unnamed figures who are nevertheless recognizable as Xerxes and serve as a shorthand for barbarian despotism. As such, the book is more than a study of Xerxes: it is a study of the reception of one aspect of the Persian Empire more generally.

Chapters 3 and 5 explore, among other things, aspects of Jewish Xerxes traditions, which present their own challenges to those seeking 'Xerxes'. The Hebrew original of the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah feature the Persian king 'Artaxerxes' (אַרְתַּחְשַׁסְתְּא, Nehemiah 2:1), but Josephus attributes these to 'Xerxes' (*Antiquitates Judaicae* XI.120–183), apparently reflecting his preference for the somewhat different chronology of the Septuagint's I Esdras. Vice versa, the events in the Hebrew Book of Esther, featuring the Persian King 'Ahasuerus' (אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ, Esther 1:1) – a name now understood as the Hebrew version of the Persian (*Xšayārša*, i.e., Xerxes) – are placed by Josephus in the reign of Artaxerxes (*Antiquitates Judaicae* XI.184–296), following the Septuagint's translation of 'Ahasuerus' as 'Artaxerxes'. Which of these figures belongs in a book on ancient perspectives on Xerxes? Bridges, after explaining the complex identity problems, plumps for Josephus's 'Xerxes' and the biblical 'Ahasuerus' (omitting Josephus's version of Esther and the Hebrew narratives of Ezra and Nehemiah) and sensibly frames her analysis of the story of Esther (whose date remains unsecure) as 'an imagined Xerxes-character' (p. 142) rather than a representation of Xerxes I, son of Darius.

The Jewish view of the Achaemenids, in general, and Xerxes, in particular, is striking for its independence from the later Greek and Roman tradition on Persian tyranny. In Isaiah Cyrus the Great has a significant role to play as the Lord's messiah who leads the Jews back from captivity (Isaiah 44:28–45:4) and Josephus's Cyrus – having read Isaiah's prophecy – proclaims his belief that the 'greatest god' is that of the Jews (*Antiquitates Judaicae* XI.3–4). Cyrus's Achaemenid successors are generally also positively viewed, with the exception of Josephus' Cambyses ('wicked by nature', *Antiquitates Judaicae* XI.26). Though one of Josephus's characters in the *De bello Judaico* (Agrippa) is aware of the image of Xerxes as the proud (ὑπερήφανος) barbarian invader who burnt Athens (II.358), the Xerxes of the *Antiquitates Judaicae* is strikingly different: he inherited Darius's 'piety and honour towards god' (τὴν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν εὐσέβειαν τε καὶ τιμήν) and showed himself 'exceedingly generous towards the Jews' (*Antiquitates Judaicae* XI.120). The Book of Esther's Ahasuerus is also accorded a broadly positive role as the rather passive monarch upon whom Esther and Mordecai prevail, so that the Jews are able to overcome their would-be persecutor, have their rights confirmed and extended, and massacre their enemies.

The reader naturally wonders to what degree the various different visions of Xerxes are independent. The Roman perspective is clearly an extension of the Greek, which represents the view of Xerxes that originated among a small set of city-states on the edge of his vast empire. Here, what was presumably for Xerxes a minor military setback, becomes the central event of his reign and key to his character. The Jewish author of the Book of Esther has different concerns; but striking crossovers are visible, particularly an interest in the political intrigues of the court and harem, reminding us 'that an interest in these royal themes was not the sole preserve of those for whom Xerxes was the archetypal enemy' (p. 148). Josephus stands out prominently from the Greco-Roman tradition and, along with the biblical narratives, gives us a brief glimpse into a cultural view of the Achaemenids from a small group of people who felt that they had benefited from Persian rule. Finally, the public sculpture and epigraphy of the Achaemenids themselves, though it failed to inspire a broader Xerxes tradition visible today, stands wholly independent from either the Greco-Roman or Jewish perspectives. The absence of any mention of the 'Greek Wars' or Yahweh in these texts and images, in tandem with facts like the uninterrupted building of Xerxes's reign (p. 75, n. 3), reminds us that the major surviving traditions on Xerxes derive from two small ethnic groups who would, in the context of his empire, have seemed largely insignificant.

The literary history of Xerxes overlaps to a great degree with the literary history of the Persian Wars, already the subject of an excellent volume edited by Bridges, Hall and Rhodes in 2007.[3] In combination with Briant's *Darius in the Shadow of Alexander*, the scholar of the reception of the Achaemenid world in ancient and modern European literature is now exceptionally well served. One might, perhaps, have wished that Bridges had defined her subject more broadly so as to include the vast quantities of later material on Xerxes, particularly in the (early) modern period. But we should probably be glad that she did not. Several essays in the 2007 volume touch on later perceptions of Xerxes and the Persian Wars. More importantly, such a scope would have diluted the book's focus on interrogating every scrap of evidence from the classical world.

Inevitably there are places where Bridges might have been more expansive, above all with the Jewish material. Given the lack of clarity surrounding the names Xerxes and Artaxerxes between the Bible and Josephus, it would be easy to argue for a more expansive approach. Accepting the omission of the biblical books of Nehemiah and Ezra, what about the (admittedly brief) mention of the Persian Wars against the Greeks in Daniel 10:20–11:4? Or of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes in the Book of Ezra, which even features another 'Ahasuerus' (II Esdras 4:6, whom Bridges mentions in a note on p. 142)? In general more context on the presentation of the Achaemenid Empire in the Jewish tradition would have been welcome, mirroring Bridges's generous approach to Greco-Roman literature (compare the useful section on the wider presentation of Achaemenid monarchy in Plato and Xenophon). Since Josephus represents a confluence of the Greek and Jewish

[3] *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars: Antiquity to the Third Millennium*, ed. E. Bridges, E. Hall and P. J. Rhodes, Oxford, 2007.

historiographical traditions, we might have hoped for some discussion of the continuity between his presentations of Darius and Xerxes in the *Antiquitates Judaicae* (to complement discussion of the father-son pairing in all other parts of the book). It would also have been interesting to read Bridges's views on Munson's recent thesis that some of Herodotus's stories transmit the views of Persian elites critical of their kings – Xerxes included.[4] The uncertain provenance of these stories does, of course, make them tricky to handle, but the possibility that the 'narrowly royal perspective' explored in Chapter 3 might be broadened by the perspectives offered by Persian aristocratic traditions contemporary to Herodotus might have been worth exploring. A few parallels might be pushed slightly harder. Bridges makes the interesting point (pp. 165–6) that the elder Seneca's *Suasoria* 2.3 links Xerxes's defeat with *invidia*; this seems a clear echo of the notion of φθόνος θεῶν (i.e., 'jealousy' of the gods) an idea linked with Xerxes's defeat in Aeschylus's *Persians* (361), and Herodotus (VII.10ε, VII.46.3), parallels not pursued in detail. These are, however, less criticisms than wishes for more of a good thing.

Quotations (and sometimes epitomes) from ancient sources are extensive – providing a welcome opportunity to dwell on the source material – but given only in English. Key phrases in Greek and Latin are often given in brackets and important terms are highlighted in the following discussion (invariably philologically acute), but it would have been useful to have citations in the original language as well.

Bridges does not dwell explicitly on the virtues of the task she undertakes and, in conclusion, it may be worth offering some reflections on the value of this type of literary biography. As a form of intellectual history, it illustrates the way in which temporal distance and, most importantly, the desire to use historical figures for moral and political purposes can gradually distil complex personalities into one-dimensional exempla.[5] It shows how the past is put into the service of the present, most strikingly in the case of Alexander the Great, who seems to have used Xerxes' invasion as 'a central element of his own propaganda campaign' (pp. 119–25). It also allows unexpected stories to emerge from works separated by many centuries, such as the repeated characterization of Xerxes in Greek sources by *megalophrosunê* (lit. 'great-mindedness') and *mega phronein* (lit. 'thinking big'), both terms associated with 'arrogance' but also, in the case of *megalophrosunê*, with laudable 'magnanimity'. This trait is found in a variety of ambivalent or condemnatory contexts in Herodotus (VII.10ε, 24.1, 136.2), Isocrates (*Panegyricus* 4.90), Pausanias (III.4.8), and Plutarch (*Life of Alexander* 37.3). In such cases, Bridges is able to trace ongoing discourses and debates over Xerxes's character (pp. 56–7, 108–9 and n. 23, 180, 122–4). Most importantly, however, such biography encourages the scholar to bring out the differences and subtleties in the different presentation of her subject – a salutary antidote against the natural tendency to press the various Xerxeses of antiquity into a single mould.

[4] R. V. Munson, 'Who are Herodotus' Persians?', in *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies*, II, ed. id., Oxford, 2013, pp. 321–35 (orig. pub.: *The Classical World*, 102, 2009, pp. 457–70).

[5] For an example in some ways analogous – the Vandals remembered in a particular school of French historiography, whence their later place in the Western European cultural memory – see A. H. Merrils, 'The Origins of "Vandalism"', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 16, 2009, pp. 155–75.