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Xerxes: A Persian Life

Richard Stoneman

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Xerxes: A Persian Life. By Richard Stoneman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-300-18007-7. xi + 257 pp. £25.

The Achaemenid dynasty and the Persian Empire have attracted much academic interest over the last few decades. This attention, however, stands in marked contrast to individual rulers. In 2015, this gap in the scholarship was partially filled by two monographs on Xerxes: Emma Bridges' *Imagining Xerxes*: *Ancient Perspectives on a Persian King*, and Richard Stoneman's *Xerxes: A Persian Life*.

The purpose of Stoneman's book is to understand "what is to be the ruler of the largest empire the world had seen yet" and "how the dominant picture of Xerxes … came into being" (15). The first three chapters set the scene: they narrate how Darius I and Xerxes came into power, present a survey of some of the main features of the empire (including how it came into being, how it acquired its multi-national character, and its neighbours), and give a description of the public image of the king at the court. The fourth chapter addresses some of the problems connected with the extremely complex field of Zoroastrian studies and then focuses on Xerxes' religion, seen in the light of the various interpretations of the *Daeva Inscription*, and his attitude towards foreign gods. There follow two chapters dedicated to the invasion of Greece, described as a "distraction" and ultimately a mistake; but crucially, and Stoneman insists on this point, the king was not demoralized and did not sink "into apathy and devoted himself to buildings and women. Rather the building of Persepolis became his main occupation" (159). Building and women are the theme of the following two chapters. The description of Persepolis, brought to completion by Xerxes (unfortunately the images included are not referenced in the text, nor is a map of the palace provided to help the readers orientate themselves), is followed by a chapter that aims to correct the perception of Xerxes as a king prone to excessive lust and to analyse relations within the royal family, namely the role of queens, the nature of their power, sexual relations, and the harem. Finally, the final events of the reign and the conspiracy that led to Xerxes' assassination are discussed.

Stoneman concludes that Xerxes started off as an immature ruler with a possible inferiority complex towards his father, and an ambition to "carry out a Great Deed" (212). After experiencing a setback in Greece, he learned his way through failure and concentrated his efforts on Persepolis. He loved gardening and was a pious Zoroastrian, and was not a bigot whose choices were dictated by religious motives. Concerning his personality, the ultimate motivation for his endeavours, first in Greece and then at Persepolis, might have been "Persian melancholy", a condition that gave him a "sense of mortality" and prompted him to search for glory. He might also have been a

passionate man with a strong sense of responsibility and a dominant mother, or maybe this is just "Persian story-telling" (216).

Writing a biography of Xerxes is challenging on many levels. On the one hand, Xerxes' image has fossilized into the stereotype of the overbearing tyrant, which makes it difficult for anybody interested in studying his life to have an unbiased approach, regardless of whether one accepts or rejects this assumption. There are more daunting problems to deal with, however. Despite his long-lasting fame in the ancient world, we actually know precious little of him from either first hand accounts or in reports by later writers. Also, even if the representation of Xerxes in ancient (and modern) sources is less stereotyped than it may appear at first sight, it is nonetheless a cultural construct.

Stoneman duly acknowledges all these difficulties in his introduction. The problem of scanty evidence is unavoidable, but Stoneman makes use of almost everything that is available. By not limiting his sources to Greek authors and royal inscriptions, and by using a variety of documents, he avoids both unconditioned scepticism and a Greek-centred vision. This is the greatest strength of the book: the sections that search for echoes of Xerxes in the *Esfandiyār* of the *Shahnameh* are undoubtedly the most interesting. Stoneman has surveyed an enormous amount of literature and it is obvious that he has enjoyed doing so. The main problem, however, is that these pieces of later documentation are not connected together harmoniously and the evocative and the scholarly elements fail to blend into a unified picture. Despite declaring that his "result will … be more suggestive than historical" (15), the author seems to fluctuate between the two approaches, and this affects the coherence of the work. The final result is thus neither a study on Persian kingship, nor an academic biography of Xerxes.

Unfortunately, the text is tainted by inaccuracies throughout. For example, the number of the Immortals is placed at one thousand, instead of ten thousand, at least twice (61 and 121), and one of Momigliano's ideas is repeated three times in ten pages (47, 51, and 57). Imprecisions can also be found in the endnotes and references: the *Cambridge Ancient History* is confused with the *Cambridge History of Iran* (246n61), some titles are not listed in the bibliography (such as 247n21), and the abbreviations used are not always done so consistently (354n50, 235n9, etc.).

Nevertheless, the book makes for entertaining reading, and there is much erudition and passion. In the end, however, the reader is left with the

impression that Stoneman's approach would have benefitted from some closer polishing, revision, and organization.

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