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Emma Bridges,

*IImagining Xerxes: Ancient Perspectives on a Persian King.*


This volume, a revised doctoral thesis from the University of Durham (UK), appears in a series entitled “Bloomsbury Studies in Classical Reception.” A blurb at the front of the book explains that each contribution in the series “will explore the appropriation, reconceptualization and recontextualization of various aspects of the Graeco-Roman world and its culture, looking at the impact of the ancient world on modernity.” Emma Bridges most certainly discusses the appropriation and reworking of the image of Xerxes in antiquity, as her title suggests; there is really only one chapter at the end (the Epilogue) that takes up the impact of the Persian king in the modern world.

Hence, this is basically a book about the handling of the figure of Xerxes in the ancient world. It begins with a chapter on Aeschylus’ *Persians* and Timotheus’ identically titled work. Then follows one on Herodotus. Chapter 3 takes us in a different direction, being a brief discussion of Persian views of Xerxes, primarily in art and in monumental inscriptions. Chapter 4 returns us to the Greek world with a treatment of Xerxes in fourth-century texts, chiefly Attic oratory. Chapter 5 looks at Xerxes in what we might loosely style later “prose romances”: historians (Ctesias, Ephorus/Diodorus), the Greek novel (Chariton), Philostratus’ *Imagines*, and the biblical Book of Esther. Chapter 6 takes up Xerxes in a similarly broad range of authors: Latin poets (Propertius, Juvenal) and prose writers (Nepos, Seneca), Greek imperial prose writers (Pausanias, Plutarch), and Josephus. I think it is evident from this survey of the book’s main discussions that Bridges has taken on an ambitious and wide-ranging set of materials. I think she is particularly to be commended for her decision to treat texts that do not come from Graeco-Roman writers. Each chapter begins with a reflection inspired by an illustration (drawn by Asa Taulbut), some based on ancient art, but many adapted from modern era images. Chapter 3 contains two photographs of Achaemenid monumental art (a bit light and grainy, but still useful). Bridges has supplied almost all the translations of Greek and Roman texts; the Persian texts come from Kuhrt’s corpus of sources (Routledge 2007).
If I have read her book correctly, Bridges essentially argues that, with notable exceptions, the image of Xerxes underwent a considerable rhetorical flattening over time: while Herodotus managed to produce a fairly nuanced portrait of the king, later authors make him a two-dimensional representative either of barbarian savagery or turpitude combined with softness and passivity. The exceptions to these characterizations are (not surprisingly) Persian views, where continuity with the past is stressed (especially with Darius), and those that we get of the king from Jewish sources: Esther and Josephus.

Bridges is very good at bringing out how elaborate previews of Xerxes in Aeschylus’ *Persae* help to establish the image of the defeated Xerxes before we actually see him. Though first characterized as all powerful, Atossa’s nightmare vision of her son, the contrast with Darius that is brought about through the appearance of his father’s ghost, and the messenger’s report of Salamis prepare us for the image of Xerxes as a defeated king. When he finally does appear, Bridges lays great stress on Xerxes’ appearance as it is registered in his clothes: the king in rags. A quick glance at Garvie on the *Persae* showed me that this emphasis on clothing is not a new insight; furthermore, the much anticipated arrival of Agamemnon in the *Agamemnon* seems to me to parallel quite closely the delayed arrival of Xerxes, but this is not mentioned, though other parallels between the two kings are (29 n. 51). Indeed, since Bridges’ focus is so exclusively on Xerxes, there is a narrowing that seems to lead her to miss significant topics. Garvie points out how important clothing is in general throughout the play, not just Xerxes’ rags. How many kings were presented in rags before the production of the *Persae*? Was Xerxes the first so portrayed, or one of the first, and if so, how does he relate to later figures (I am thinking of the Euripidean Telephus)? In Atossa’s dream, Xerxes harnesses both Persia and Greece under the yoke, thereby symbolizing his attempt “to subjugate Hellas and join it to Asia” (19). Doesn’t this put Persia and Greece on a par, and Xerxes the liege-lord of both, as though a third party, and not the ruler of one of the places to start with? That strikes me as an important detail. On the whole though, Bridges does a good job of setting up important themes to which she returns later: the ruler who should be powerful, but who turns out to be a passive observer and a victim of events.

Bridges makes two strong, interrelated claims at the start of her chapter on Herodotus and Xerxes (45): Herodotus gives us “our most detailed insight into the character and actions of Xerxes,” and this treatment constitutes the most “thorough” of any Persian. I think that she is correct in the first claim, but I wonder about the second: the presentation of Cyrus the Great is pretty detailed, as is that of Camby-
ses, though both are on a smaller scale; and Darius is roughly comparable, I think, garnering a lot of Herodotus’ interest in Books 3-6. For the most part I accept her evaluation of Herodotus’ portrait: while no doubt a violent and brutal man, Xerxes can also be strangely insightful, and thus not simply a cartoonishly wicked figure. However, I think that in her effort to appreciate the “gray-areas” of Herodotus’ presentation, she sometimes makes arguments that verge on special pleading. Thus while it is perhaps technically true that Pythius is not being scrupulously reciprocal in his relations with Xerxes, I do not think that his requests rise to the level of a violation of xenia (50), and even if they did, does his behavior make Xerxes’ cutting in half of Pythius’ son OK? I don’t think so: it is still the action of a man who is capable of extreme violence and who can change his attitude toward a subordinate in a flash (cf. Cambyses and the son of Prexaspes). Bridges makes a very good point in connection with the final view we get of Xerxes in Herodotus: that the episode with Masistes and his wife establishes topics that will be important later in the novelistic treatment of the king (erotic intrigue, harem politics).

Constraints of space force me to notice just a few points in the remainder. Bridges is good on the fourth-century Athenian response to Xerxes: yet more selective and less subtle, and with a focus on a few key elements. While convincing, Bridges might have observed that this flattening basically was occurring with much of the remembered past at this period, even for local Athenian history. Real affinities are detected between Esther and treatments of Xerxes in the Greek novel. At Rome, Xerxes is even more a static picture. I had a small problem with Bridges’ take on Propertius 2.1.17-26: since the recusatio there includes mention of Remus and Carthage, how can the passage be advocating Roman military success over Greek, when two of the dismissed topics are Roman? I very much liked the discussions of Lucullus and Caligula as Xerxes-like, as well as the problem Plutarch saw in Greek treatments of Xerxes: portraits of him could begin to sound too much like attacks on the Roman emperors.

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