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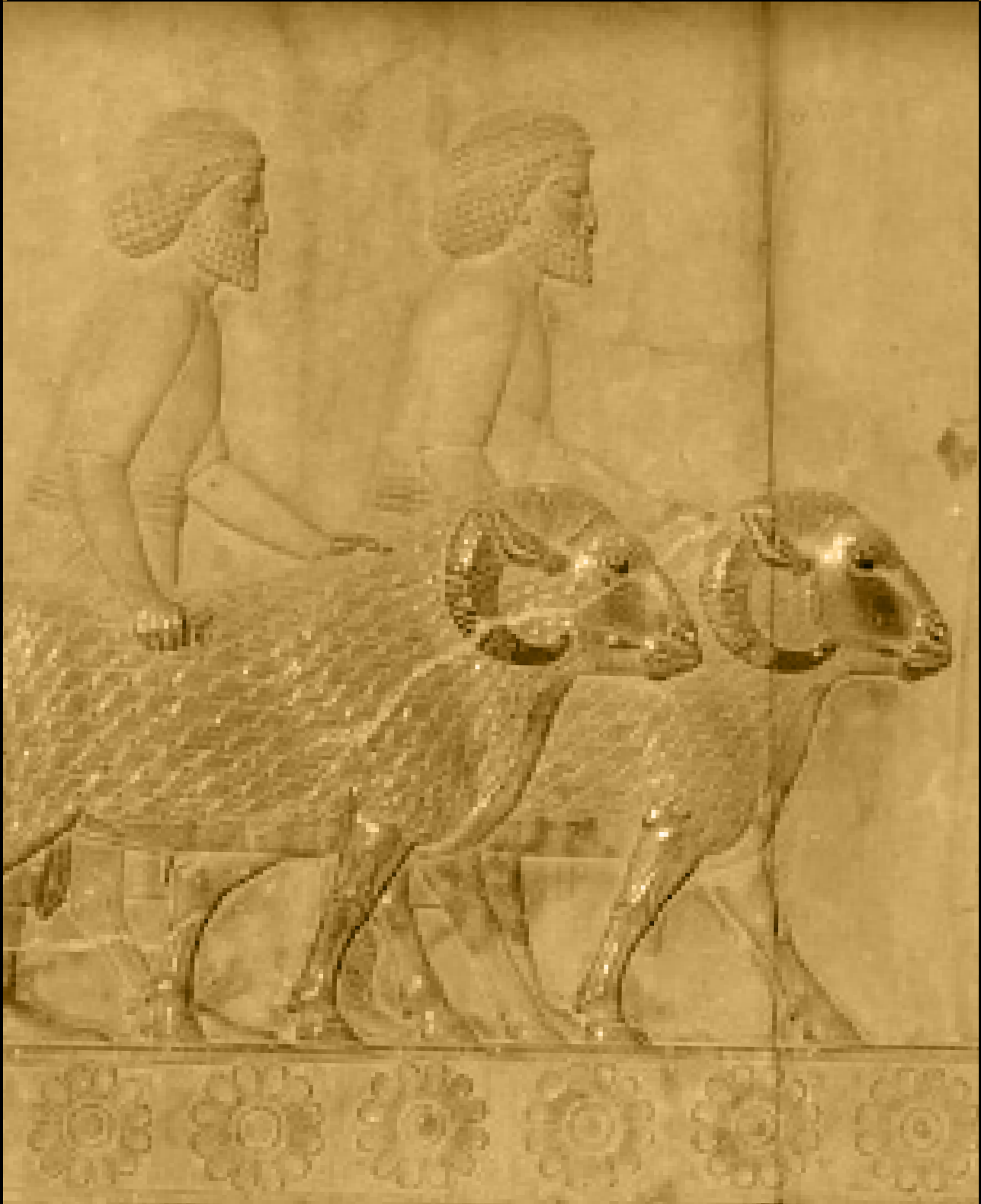
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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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**Stoneman, Richard. 2015. *Xerxes: A Persian Life*. New Haven:
Yale University Press. 288 p., £25.00, ISBN 978-0-300-18007-7.**

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones
Cardiff University

Recent scholarly approaches to the lives of ancient Iranian monarchs have opted for the Reception Studies approach, filtering the rulers through the long-lens of ancient and modern historiography. Not so Richard Stoneman. He boldly bucks the trend and in his *Xerxes: A Persian Life* proves that it is possible to write a very good biography of a long-dead Persian.

He takes a cradle-to-grave (or harem-to-ossuary) approach in doing so and tackles the complex, conflicting, multi-layered sources with gusto. Xerxes (486-465 BCE) is firmly placed in the context of his world and we learn much about the history and culture of the Achaemenid Empire, first formed by the military genius of Cyrus the Great and solidified by the brilliant Darius the Great, Xerxes' indomitable father.

Stoneman's Xerxes is complex, an individual with Grand Designs (*megalophrosyne*, as the Greeks would have it), who enjoyed 'conspicuous displays of power and superiority'. Nowhere is this better seen than in his lavish building-programme. Stand at the foot of the monumental double staircase which leads up to the colossal bull-guarded portal known as the Gate Of All Nations at Persepolis and you will come face to face with the grandeur of Xerxes' imperial vision. Stoneman gives an impressively vivid picture of Persepolis and of its function, carefully crafting an account of the workings of the Persian

court and speaking sense about controversial issues like the harem, eunuchs, and the priestly magi, remarkably – and successfully – fleshing out Xerxes’ world through references to Gore Vidal’s dazzling novel, *Creation*, which is set in Xerxes’ empire. The Greek wars are handled with flair, but (rightly) they are not allowed to dominate the work. Xerxes’ complex religious policy is especially well-handled.

Stoneman justly pushes the notion that for the Greeks the Persians were a puzzlement. Take the story Herodotus tells of Xerxes’ infatuation with a plane tree (to strains of Handel’s *largo*); Stoneman regards this as being ‘consistent with a love of gardens that has always characterised Persian culture’ and was a reflection of the monarch’s mastery of the environment. He stresses that for the Greeks, Persian gardens were a symbol of Oriental decadence: ‘a garden for a Greek is a place where you grow onions’.

Yet this volume is more than a ‘life’. Stoneman is a great Persophile (it takes one to know one) and he dazzles with his familiarity of Iran’s culture, its poetry in particular. He argues that echoes of Xerxes are traceable in the *Shahnameh* (‘Book of Kings’, c. 1010 CE), especially in the character of Esfandiyar, a king renowned for his cunning, bravery, and brilliance. This is utterly convincing.

Xerxes has received bad press. Louche tyrant of the Greek sources, dupe and comic stooge in the Hebrew book of Esther, in the preposterous Hollywood movie *300: Rise of an Empire*, he becomes a satanic entity, a proto-ISIS fanatic. Even in Iran his reputation is, at best, ambiguous. I have met many young Iranians whose names, Kourosh and Dariush, are proudly sported in emulation of the ancient Greats, Cyrus and Darius. But I know only one Khashayar, Xerxes. He runs a bookshop in Isfahan. Next time I’m there, I’ll give him a copy of Stoneman’s rewarding life (and afterlife) of Xerxes. I want Khashayar to be proud of his namesake.

