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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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**Briant, Pierre. 2015. *Darius in the shadow of Alexander*. (Trans.)
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Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones

In Oliver Stone's 2004 film *Alexander*, Colin Farrell - in the role of history's most famous Macedonian self-publicist - brings his forces face-to-face with the army of the Persian Great King, Darius III. This king (played by Israeli actor, Raz Dagan) looks gorgeous, swathed in imperial purple robes, his eyes outlined with kohl. Yet Darius is a mute part. *Alexander* displays all the familiar Orientalist notions about the inferiority and picturesque-ness of Eastern societies, symbolized by the silently despotic - but curiously attractive - ruler: Raz Dagan's good-looking Darius III.

This Darius, the last king of the Achaemenid dynasty, is the focus of Pierre Briant's intrepid, imposing book, a translation from the French original. Briant does not address Stone's interpretation of Darius as he is no fan of popular culture, although *Alexander* is symbolic of the way Persian history has been marginalised in the West.

Few of the later Achaemenid rulers have attracted the interest of historians; but of them all, Darius III has fared the worst. Whenever his name appears, he is inevitably dwarfed by his nemesis, Alexander of Macedon, so that when writing about Darius, he is invariably placed in Alexander's shadow. Briant assesses that phenomenon, but in no way should this book be thought of as a biography of the

last Achaemenid.

It is a complex study, and the reader needs to be familiar with a large array of Classical sources to fully engage with Briant's overarching thesis. The historical verdict on Darius, it emerges, is to a great extent chiefly dependant on where he is encountered: Arrian, for instance crafts a negative image of Darius, while Diodorus pens a more positive portrait. Curtius Rufus uses Darius as an "exempla" in the vacillations of fortune; Justin concentrates on the exceptional bravery Darius displayed as a warrior. For Plutarch, Darius' reign was part of the inevitable slide into Oriental decadence. The Classical historians give one abiding image of Alexander's greatness, but multiple views of Darius - even from the same author: Justin's Darius is virtuous in battle, but bloody at court.

Briant also turns his attention to Darius in the later Persian traditions, especially Ferdowsi's great *Shahnameh*, a rich poetic amalgam of history, myth, and legend which served to bolster and eventually consolidate Persian identity in the centuries following Iran's conquest by the Arab Muslims and the demise of Zoroastrianism. Ferdowsi makes Alexander ("Iskander") the half-brother of Darius ("Dara") and when, as is inevitable, they come into conflict, Darius has a heroic death, foreshadowing that of Rostam.

Briant's book is masterful. But it is also dense, over-worked, and slow. Large portions dwell on historiographic traditions in French thought, but this becomes tiresome very quickly. While there are many displays of erudition, by and large, even in translation, this book is over-wordy and baroque. The illustrations are poorly chosen and add little to argument and are, anyway, reproduced very badly. The rich Notes section, however, shows Briant to be a master of the *longue durée* of Iran's history.

Readers approaching this volume should arm themselves with a good background knowledge of Achaemenid history and Greek historiography. It is not for the beginner. But as a confident display of how to approach the reception history and image building of any historical personage, it is unshakable in its methodology.

