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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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Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones

In recent years the concept of writing biographies of ancient individuals has changed considerably. We are more aware now that our ancient sources are largely inadequate for the writing of a comprehensive biography (although there are notable exceptions in the area of Roman imperial biographies). In place of narrative biography we now mainly have a vogue for the reception history of ancient greats. And this is what Emma Bridges produces in her new study of Xerxes. It's a fresh and rewarding approach to some familiar (and some less so) material.

This reception-biography approach has already been well laid out by Pierre Briant in his impressive (if baroque) *Darius in the Shadow of Alexander*, an examination of the character of Darius III in Classical literature, western historiography, and Iranian tradition. Reza Zarghamee does much the same with his 2013 study of Cyrus II. This approach is inevitable. It is practically all we can do with the Persian monarchs given that we are forced to deal with sources which come from beyond the time and the place of the individual being studied. Bridges cites neither of these potentially important works, but

she is certainly in the zeitgeist of approaching Achaemenid Imperial 'biography'.

She explores the construction of Xerxes in Aeschylus and Herodotus, utilising some smart close-readings of the texts and securing her findings firmly within current scholarship (the book is the re-work of a PhD thesis and this shows; this is not necessarily a criticism, but a bit of distancing - and freeing up - from the thesis would have given the book a bit more bite). Chapter 4 on the use made of Xerxes in fourth century Attic oratory is very good and Bridges demonstrates clearly how the Athenians could activate a very sharply honed sense of their past, so tightly entwined as it was in Persian imperial policy. The chapter neatly complements some recent work on late Classical conceptions of Persian history and provides, through the focus on Xerxes, a neat and revealing case-study on the use and abuse of a figure of considerable historical and cultural clout.

Less successful is Bridges' engagement with Ctesias (Chapter 5) and what she qualifies as the 'alternative (his)stories' of Xerxes. Ctesias' account of Xerxes' reign is not the salacious gossip-column journalism she (and others) wish it to be; in fact it is strangely lacking in incident. Ctesias' Xerxes is not crafted in the same mould as the 'palace playboy' (Bridges' memorable phrase) encountered towards the end of Herodotus' Book 9. It was Ctesias though who first reported that Xerxes was murdered by one of his sons in a skilfully arranged court coup, although this has often been dismissed as a typical piece of Ctesian scandal-mongering, until a Babylonian cuneiform eclipse text confirmed that the king was indeed killed by one of his sons (probably Artaxerxes I).

A more solid grounding in Achaemenid scholarship would have helped Bridges' Chapter 3 ('The Persian Perspective') too. In the story of Darius' succession as told by Herodotus, the 'violent struggle' between the king's many sons has Xerxes emerge triumphant because he pulls rank and because his mother, Atossa, 'had all the power.' Evidence from the Persepolis Fortification archive revealed the probability of a coregency between Darius and Xerxes a full twelve years before Xerxes' mention in Herodotus as Darius' heir. This forces us to rethink how we should approach Herodotus - and all Greek sources - in our reconstruction even of the narrative of Achaemenid dynastic history.

Bridges' rewarding study ultimately shows that the historical verdict on Xerxes is to a great extent chiefly dependant on where he is encountered within the Classical (and Biblical) texts. It is a confident display of how to approach biography-cum-reception history and how to examine the image building of any historical personage.

