XERXES

A PERSIAN LIFE

RICHARD STONEMAN

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RICHARD STONEMAN

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Frontispiece: Seal of Xerxes from Dascyleion. After Kaptan 2002.

Contents

List of Illustrations vi
Preface viii

Introduction 1
1 Accession 17
2 The Persian Empire 35
3 The Image of a King 69
4 The Religion of Xerxes 88
5 Invasion (I): The Cornerstone of Greek Freedom 109
6 Invasion (II): The Wooden Walls 139
7 Persepolis 160
8 Family Romances 181
9 Assassination 195
Conclusion 210

Appendix 1 Xerxes in Opera and Drama 219
Appendix 2 The Birth of Persian Kings 223
Appendix 3 The Chronology of Xerxes' Advance through Greece 226
Abbreviations 229
Notes 230
Bibliography 258
Index 268

Illustrations

Plates

between pages 84–85

1 Frontispiece to Colley Cibber, *Xerxes*, London 1736.
2 The Treasury Relief, currently in the Tehran Museum.
3 Detail from the Treasury Relief: the petitioner, perhaps the *hazarapatiš*, or another court dignitary.
4 Pasargadae: view from Tell-i-Takht.
5 The Zendan-i-Suleiman (Prison of Solomon) at Pasargadae
6 The Qa'aba of Zoroaster at Naqsh-i-Rustam, near Persepolis.
7 Relief from the Tripylon at Persepolis: lion attacking bull.
8 A gold armlet from the Oxus Treasure, currently in the British Museum.
9 Gold rhyton (pouring vessel), currently in the Tehran Museum.
10 Hunting relief from Celaenae, currently in the Çanakkale Museum.
11 Relief of musician and warriors from the 'Polyxena tomb', currently in the Çanakkale Museum.
12 Taşkule, the 'stone tower', Foça, Turkey.
13 The trilingual inscription from the Letoön (Sanctuary of Leto) near Xanthos, Turkey.
14 Coins of the Persian Empire. (a) Gold siglos of Darius the Great © BibleLandPictures.com/Alamy. (b) Silver coin of Shapur I. (c) Coin of Mazaeus.
15 Tiled floor in the palace of Darius I at Susa.
16 The Tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae.
17 Hunting relief from Taq-e-Bostan near Kermanshah.
18 A Magus, or Zoroastrian priest.
19 Relief from the tomb of Darius I at Naqsh-e-Rustam: the king before a fire-altar.
20 Cypress tree at Abarkuh.
21 Xerxes' 'daeva-inscription', currently in the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.
22 A winged disk from a pilaster at Persepolis.

between pages 180–81
23 H. Fletcher, an engraving of Babylon, 1690.
24 The Hellespont: view from the south.
25 Thermopylae: the Leonidas monument.
26 Thermopylae: general view
27 The Persian army, engraving from Samuel Pitiscus' edition of Q. Curtius Rufus, *Historia Alexandri Magni*, Utrecht 1683.
28 The present-day ruins of Sardis.
29 A map of the island and straits of Salamis.
30 The battlefield of Plataea: view to the north.
31 The approach to Persepolis.
32 Gateway of All Lands.
33 Ganj-nameh on the outskirts of Hamadan, Iran.
34 Reliefs from the Apadana at Persepolis.
35 Detail of a Bactrian with an urn.
36 View of Persepolis from Kuh-i-Rahmat.
37 The king and attendants depicted on a door jamb of the Palace of Xerxes.
38 A rendering of the Gateway of All Lands, engraving by Johan van den Avele from Samuel Pitiscus' edition of Q. Curtius Rufus, *Historia Alexandri Magni*, Utrecht 1683.
39 Cornelius De Bruyn, engraving from *Travels in the Levant*, 1698.
40 Charles Chipiez, Darius' 'original plan' for Persepolis.
41 Mirza Hassan Akasbashi, photograph of Persepolis before excavation 1859.
42 Photograph of the Apadana after excavation, 1933.
43 Claeissens, Anthuenis, Esther before King Ahasuerus with Haman being sent to the Gallows beyond, 1577. Private Collection / Photo © Bonhams, London, UK / Bridgeman Images.
44 Erich Schmidt, Xerxes I tomb at Naqsh-e-Rustam.

Maps

		page
1	The Persian Empire	37
2	The Road to Thermopylae 1	119
3	The Road to Thermopylae 2	120
4	The Hellespont	131

Tables

1	The Family of Xerxes	x
2	The Legendary Genealogy of the Persian Kings	12
3	Tabari's Version of the Genealogy of the Persian Kings	13
4	The Families of Spitama and Cyrus	97

XERXES.

A

TRAGEDY.

As it is Acted at the

THEATRE-ROYAL

IN

LINCOLN's-INN-FIELDS.

Written by COLLEY CIBBER, *Esq;*

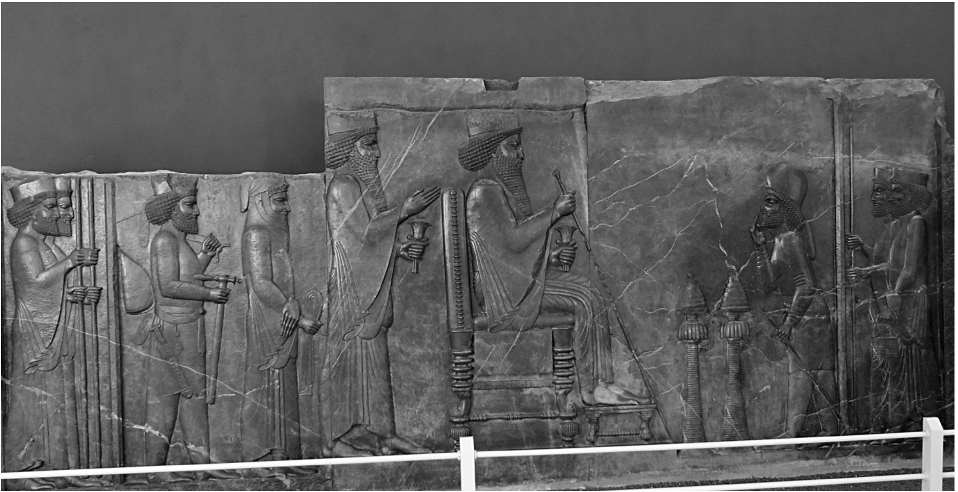
Quot Homines, Tot Sententiæ.

LONDON:

Printed for W. FEALES, at *Rowe's-Head*, over-against *St. Clement's Church* in the *Strand*.

M.DCC.XXXVI.

1 Frontispiece to Colley Cibber, Xerxes (London 1736).



2 The Treasury Relief, Tehran Museum. The king (probably Xerxes, but possibly Darius), seated, receives petitioners. Behind him stand a guard and a priest.

3 The petitioner, perhaps the *hazarapatiš*, or another court dignitary.

4 Pasargadae: view from Tell-i-Takht. The Zendan-i-Suleiman is in the nearer distance, and in the far distance the Tomb of Cyrus.

Preface

This is the first attempt at a serious biography of Xerxes, or any Achaemenid king, since, I believe, Plutarch's *Life of Artaxerxes*, written in the second century AD. It grew out of my interest in the figure of Alexander III of Macedon, who overthrew the Achaemenid Persian Empire and demonised the memory of Xerxes to throw into relief his own virtues. The expression 'biography' in such a case has to be taken with a pinch of salt. But I have tried to make this book more than just a packaged history of the period. A writer in the twenty-first century has some advantages over Plutarch, both in the obvious academic resources available and in the more sophisticated understanding of personality that has emerged in the modern world. In addition, I have been inspired by the attempt of Pierre Briant in his book *Darius dans l'ombre d'Alexandre* (2003) to gain access to a Persian view of the reign of the king in question through medieval Persian writings. The problems and possible rewards of such an approach are outlined in the Introduction.

Writing a biography leads one into a great many specialist fields; in this case, they include art history, economic history, Biblical Studies and the history of warfare. Of particular importance here is Achaemenid Studies, a discipline effectively founded by the late Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg in the 1980s, and practised by a growing number of scholars highly trained in the variety of ancient languages spoken throughout the Achaemenid Empire: besides the usual classical languages and Old Persian, these include Elamite, Akkadian, Egyptian and Aramaic. Often what can be deduced from the clay tablets and other documents in these languages is at odds with what we are told by the familiar classical authors, creating a temptation to reject

Herodotus and the rest as of little or no value. This is throwing the baby out with the bathwater, for without Herodotus and Ctesias, Plutarch and Justin, there would have been little motive to study Achaemenid history in the first place. A balance has to be kept.

I have been fortunate to be able to make use of the resources of the University of Exeter, which has welcomed me as an associate since my move to the area in 2007. I studied Persian language with Leonard Lewisohn and Ali Mossadegh, two excellent and gifted teachers who opened a window onto a new world of literature unfamiliar to most classicists. In October 2014 I travelled to Iran with a small group organised by Lynette Mitchell of the University of Exeter through the travel company Travel the Unknown. This enabled me to revisit the sites of Persepolis, Naqsh-e-Rostam and Naqsh-e-Rajab for the first time since 1977, and to visit most of the other major Achaemenid and Sassanid sites for the first time (including Susa, Pasargadae, Firuzabad, Bishapur). Conversations on site enriched my understanding (and I hope that of the others) of what we saw; portions of this book were also read by Lynette Mitchell and Diana Darke. Richard Seaford was as always an endlessly stimulating companion.

I have benefited from the learning of four readers for Yale University Press, two of whom worked extremely hard in providing detailed comments and a useful bibliography.

I am grateful as always to my editor (and friend) Heather McCallum for her support throughout the writing of this book, and her incisive and constructive comments on an earlier draft. The copy-editor, Richard Mason, helped me to think harder about clarity of expression at many points.

It is customary for writers on classical subjects to include an apology or a caveat about inconsistency in the transliteration of Greek words and names. I try to use the familiar Latinate forms of Greek proper names (Thucydides not Thoukydides, Aeschylus not Aischylos), but to transliterate Greek words and less familiar names according to the Greek spelling (*skytale*, Artemision). To this trap for the unwary I can add another, about the transliteration of Persian. I attempt to follow consistently the usage of *Encyclopaedia Iranica* where available (Ferdowsi, Mir Khwand, Esfandiyar), but many of the texts quoted will use an Arabised form (Firdausi, Mirkhond, Asfandiyar or Esfandiyadh). I hope readers will brace themselves for some minor confusions. Emma Bridges, *Imagining Xerxes* (Bloomsbury 2014) appeared after this book was already in the hands of the publishers, and I have been unable to take account of it.

Richard Stoneman

Hystaspes = Irdabana

Gobryas = f
(H. 7.5)

Ariomandes f = Artystone/ Irtashduna daughter of Cyrus = DARIUS =

Artabazanes m. m. Arsames H. 7.69 Gobryas H. 7.72

Mardonius = Artazostre f(2) H. 7.2 = XERXES = (1) Amestris daughter of Otanes

= (3) =

Tithraustes (illegitimate) Diod. 11.60.5

Pandušaša f = Artochmes

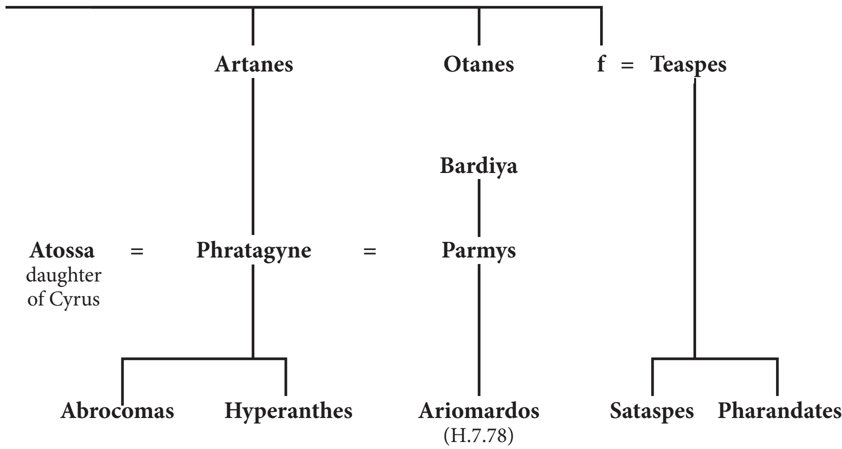
Ištin f = Hymaces

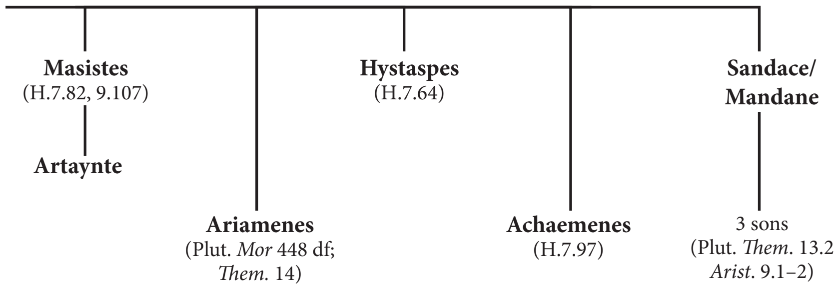
f = Dauises

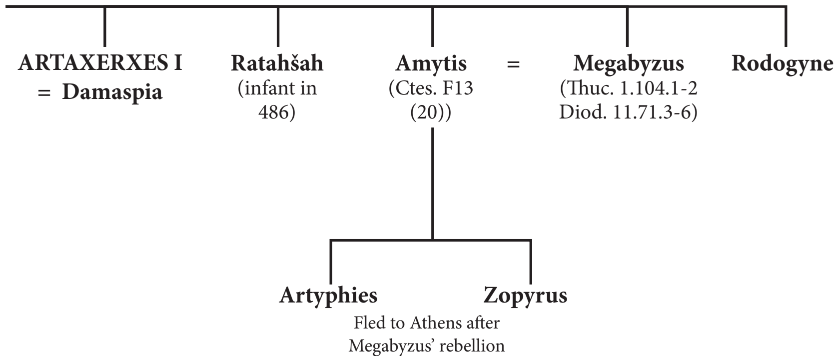
Darius Hystaspes

Table 1 The Family of Xerxes

This genealogy shows full brothers and sisters of Xerxes (i.e. sons and daughters of Darius). For some half-brothers and cousins of Xerxes, see the list of the High Command of the invasion of Greece on pp. 122–23. On Xerxes' children, see Brosius 1996, 73. On Darius' wives, see Brosius 1996, 50–52.


Artanes
Otanes
f = Teaspes
Bardiya
Atossa
daughter
of Cyrus
=
Phratagyne
=
Parmys
Abrocomas
Hyperanthes
Ariomardos
(H.7.78)
Sataspes
Pharandates


Masistes
(H.7.82, 9.107)
Artaynte
Hystaspes
(H.7.64)
Sandace/
Mandane
Ariamenes
(Plut. Mor 448 df;
Them. 14)
Achaemenes
(H.7.97)
3 sons
(Plut. Them. 13.2
Arist. 9.1–2)


ARTAXERXES I
= Damaspia
Ratahšah
(infant in
486)
Amytis
(Ctes. F13
(20))
=
Megabyzus
(Thuc. 1.104.1-2
Diod. 11.71.3-6)
Rodogyne
Artyphies
Zopyrus
Fled to Athens after
Megabyzus' rebellion

Introduction

Xerxes, who was laden with all the gifts and prizes of fortune, was not contented with his cavalry, his mass of infantry, the multitude of his ships or the infinite weight of his gold, but offered a prize for the man who could invent a new pleasure; yet even with this he was not satisfied; in fact, desire will never reach an end.

Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* V. 7.20

X was King Xerxes
Who, more than all Turks, is
Renowned for his fashion
Of fury and passion
X
Angry old Xerxes!

Edward Lear

Xerxes (Khshayarsha, ca. 518–465 BC), who ruled the Persian Empire from 486 to 465 BC, has largely had a bad press from history, and even worse from the moralists. He is remembered mainly as the king who failed to conquer Greece, the villain of a heroic story of resistance. The memory is a partial one, and Xerxes should equally be recognised for his achievements: he reigned for twenty years, crushed several provincial revolts, bequeathed to his heirs an empire whose boundaries were to remain stable for almost 150 years, and brought to a conclusion (apart from minor later additions) one of the greatest building projects of antiquity, the imperial city of Persepolis. Because

our surviving early sources are Greek, primarily Aeschylus' play *The Persians* and Herodotus' *Histories*, written by denizens of the little country that defeated the great empire, the view we have inherited is of Xerxes as a failure. And his failure was clearly the result not only of moral inadequacies in the king himself but of structural ones in the empire he ruled. As long ago as 1867 Henry Rawlinson saw Xerxes as the epitome of idleness, self-indulgence and corruption: 'the character of Xerxes sank below that of any of his predecessors'.[1] David Stronach in a passing remark refers to 'Xerxes, a man of less penetrating intellect'[2] (than his father), as if we had access to his IQ tests. But the characterisation repeats itself. Montaigne[3] did not mince his words when he reprised Cicero's anecdote: 'Xerxes was an idiot to offer a reward to anyone who could invent some new pleasure for him when he was already surrounded by every pleasure known to man.'

The judgement is an easy one to make on the basis of this anecdote – Xerxes as spoilt child – and it is of a piece with Greek Stoic thinking in general (Aristotle's pupil Clearchus made the same remark about Darius III).[4] Cicero's extension of the moral coincides with one leitmotif of the legendary tradition about Alexander the Great. In the story of Alexander's journey to Paradise, the learned Jew explains that 'the eye of man, as long as it has access to the light of life, is constantly agitated with the heat of desire'.[5] Often in Greek presentations and discussions influenced by Greek sources (as virtually all of them are) Xerxes and Alexander appear as kinds of weather vanes; the one constantly counterpoises the other. Xerxes is the exemplar of the vices that are opposed to the virtues of Alexander.[6] In fact, much of Xerxes' bad press is due to Alexander's propaganda: it was the conqueror who made him a villain, while Herodotus' depiction is a much more nuanced portrait of a tragic figure.[7] Alexander made play with his crossing of the Hellespont and his visit to Ilion, where Xerxes had also sacrificed to the gods, and the Macedonian king boasted of having restored Esagila in Babylon, which he falsely claimed had been destroyed by Xerxes. At Persepolis, Alexander burnt only the buildings that had been erected by Xerxes.[8] His bridge of boats on the River Indus outclassed Xerxes' bridge over the Hellespont. (It was not, like Xerxes', washed away before it could be used.) In subsequent tradition, Xerxes and Alexander are mirror images of one another; but Alexander learns his lesson, and abandons desire, where Xerxes does not. Perhaps Alexander can afford to, since his has always counted as a story of worldly success cut short, whereas Xerxes' career is seen as one of failure (in his attack on Greece), despite a reign continuing for a further fifteen years after the defeats of Salamis and Plataea. This

equipoise will confront us constantly as we set about constructing a picture of the Persian king in his own right.

The dominant view that comes out of Herodotus, the Greek historian of the Persian Wars, is of Xerxes as a commander who does not know his own mind, consistently takes the wrong advice, and wrongly thinks the gods are on his side when the Greeks know their gods are on theirs; he is then destroyed by that moral failing most characteristic of the Greek tragic hero, his own arrogance (hubris), which sets the gods against him.[9] He is not an ogre, but he consistently makes the wrong choice.[10]

The picture presented by Herodotus can be substantiated from many passages in his work, as well as being the leitmotif of the presentation of Xerxes onstage in Aeschylus' *The Persians*, dressed in rags and wailing piteously as he drags himself and the remains of his army back from Salamis to his mother in Persepolis.[11] Even the ghost of his father Darius asserts that his mind is diseased (line 750) and 'my son Xerxes is a young man who thinks young thoughts and does not remember my injunction' (lines 782–83). (Xerxes was probably in his thirties when he undertook his expedition; but at H. 7.13 he confesses to immature powers of judgement.) Later writers in antiquity took a similar view. Ctesias' surviving remarks on Xerxes are too brief to offer an interpretation, but Plato (*Laws* 695ce) saw Xerxes as the degenerate son of a great father, ruined by a 'womanish' education. Lysias in his *Funeral Speech*, composed at the end of the fifth century, stated 'Xerxes King of Asia came to despise Greece. He was cheated of his hope, humiliated by events, oppressed by disaster, and angry at those responsible.'[12]

The picture hardens in medieval and modern writers. John Lydgate[13] wrote:

> This was cheeff conceit off his fantasies,
> To haue al erthe under subieccioun.
> Thouhte his power rauhte aboue the skies,
> Off surquedie & fals presumpcioun.

Sir Walter Ralegh, in his *History of the World*, summed up the received view: 'as ill able to govern himself in peace as to guide his army in war . . . such is generally the effect of luxury when it is joined with absolute power'.[14] Early in the twentieth century the great Dutch novelist Louis Couperus wrote a novel about Xerxes entitled simply *Arrogance: The Conquests of Xerxes*.[15] 'His eyes, roaming about, were replete with the vision of an unexampled might. Asia was his. Europe would be his. His was the earth, and the skies

were his to be. His would be the winds, obedient to his sceptre. His would be the grain, and its ears would bow to him in their fullness. Those Greeks, that wretched little people yonder, he would trample in the dust. An immeasurable emotion swelled within him and caused him to smile silently.'[16]

Strangely, this is a view of royal behaviour that also pervades Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the Iranian 'national epic'. Kings become successful, and this leads to arrogance and then to a fall. One thinks of Kai Kavus' flying machine, built to challenge God himself, or his suicidal attack on the demons dwelling in Mazanderan.[17] The king must be a model of rectitude, but if he lies, God abandons him. Persian, unlike Greek, does not seem to have a word for *hybris*, but the concept is there. 'If the son brings shame on his father's name, then call him a stranger, not a son. If he slights his father's example, he deserves to suffer at the hands of fate.'[18]

Xenophon in the fourth century, in his fictional biography of Cyrus the Great (8.8.6ff), repeated the story of the moral decline of the Persians as a whole: they have forgotten the gods and are unjust to their fellow men, which is a far stronger censure than merely losing a war. Not just the king but the whole society was decadent and the empire moribund. The inadequacy of the Persian Empire became a kind of historians' tic; everyone who wrote about the empire regarded it as a moribund institution (even though it was less than 250 years old when it fell to Alexander), and its kings as degenerate and incompetent rulers and commanders. Its people were essentially unwarlike because of the enervating climate, as the author of the fourth-century Hippocratic tract *Airs Waters Places* (12–16) declared: 'The small varieties of climate to which the Asiatics are subject, extremes of both heat and cold being avoided, account for their mental flabbiness and cowardice.' The opinion was echoed by Xenophon in *History of Greece* (7.13.8). Only in recent years has this view of Persia been effectively overturned by the industry of Pierre Briant, who has argued with force and at length a case that was already adumbrated by George Grote in the nineteenth century.[19]

There are other elements too in the traditional picture of Xerxes, few of them favourable. Besides being arrogant and self-indulgent, he is also weepy, cruel and prone to rage. At the crossing of the Hellespont he sheds tears to think how few of that glorious array will be alive at the end of the campaign.[20] One cannot imagine Alexander falling prey to such self-doubt, even though he, like Xerxes, was in the first instance carrying on the unfinished business of his father.

Xerxes' anger, too, is shown not only in the famous anecdote of his whipping the Hellespont, but in a passage in Plutarch's essay, 'On the control of

anger' (*Mor.* 455e). This tells how the king wrote a threatening letter to Mount Athos before starting work on cutting a canal through it: 'Noble Athos, whose summit reaches heaven, do not put in the way of my deeds great stones difficult to work. Else I shall hew you down and cast you into the sea.'[21] 'Madness fires his mind, the waves he lashes, and enchains the wind.'[22] Rage possesses the operatic Xerxes at the end of Handel's *Serse* (III.xi), when he discovers he has been fooled by both the women in his life: 'Crolli il mondo, e "l sole s'eclissi a quest" ira, che spira il mio seno.'

The stories of hideous torture are so numerous and often introduced so casually by Herodotus as to constitute a key part of the Herodotean portrait.[23] They seem to militate against any view of the king's humanity. Xerxes comes across as a man with deformed values whose weeping is for his own shame.

These stories form an important strand of the character depicted in Colley Cibber's forgotten play *Xerxes*, which ran to a single performance in 1699, and met with 'entire damnation':[24] a wardrobe sale soon afterwards advertised 'the imperial robes of Xerxes, worn only once'.[25] Cibber (1671–1757) was an important figure in the theatre of the period, though his talent was more for comedy.[26] Arrogance is a dominant characteristic of this king, who actually holds a triumph following his retreat from Greece and follows it up with a Masque of Luxury (II. 25). The search for new pleasures pops up in Act V, soon followed by a street demonstration in which

> Three dead virgins, whom you had lately ravish'd,
> In spiteful pomp were carried through the streets,
> To turn the people's hearts against you.

The play ends with Xerxes' death in a duel with Artabanus, and in general it seems to have been received as a kind of morality tale for kings.

Even more bizarre, a famous story in Herodotus tells how Xerxes 'fell in love with' a beautiful plane tree not far from Sardis and adorned it with jewels and precious gifts.[27] The story caught the imagination of the poet Nicola Minato in the seventeenth century, and became the opening number of an opera about Xerxes set by several composers including Francesco Cavalli (*Xerse* 1655),[28] before achieving immortality in Handel's *Serse*, whose 'Ombra mai fu' has become one of his most famous arias. (A production by English Touring Opera in 2011 relocated the action to a First World War aircraft base, where the beautiful plane tree became simply an adorable 'plane.) The action of Handel's opera otherwise has nothing to do with history, revolving around a complex love-triangle with some wholly fictional

female characters in addition to the historical Amestris.[29] But the affection of the king for a beautiful tree is consistent with a love of gardens that has always characterised Persian culture (see Chapter 3). The impulse to create a beautiful setting out of nature is an important part of the Persian king's mastery of his environment.[30] An ancient Greek might see this as a sign of decadence; a garden for a Greek is a place where you grow onions.[31]

Biographies of Ancient Subjects

Writing a biography of an ancient subject is an exercise of a very special kind. The writer does not have access to original documents, except of the most limited nature, and all his information has already been filtered through other writers. Furthermore, ancient writers were not, as a rule, interested in constructing biographies in the modern sense – certainly not on the scale of some modern tomes. Ancient historians did recognise the importance of individual character in historical events, but preferred, like Herodotus, to let it emerge through accounts of the events and actions themselves. They also regarded character traits as being fixed, and subjects for moral praise or censure, rather than supposing that character is formed through the decisions that press on a subject as he goes through life. Herodotus does, however, present alternative interpretations of people's actions, side by side, and he allows us to choose what to believe. He recognises that sources are a problem.[32]

Works that seem to contradict this rule are, like Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus*, largely fictional, or, like his *Memoirs of Socrates*, a collection of anecdotes offering something like a character sketch. His *Agesilaus* is more like a Life but still describes itself as an *epainos*, an encomium. All these were written in the early fourth century BC. A little later, Satyrus wrote a *Life of Euripides*, of which we know very little except that it took the form of a dialogue. Most Hellenistic biography is lost, and the writer who was perhaps the founder of the genre, Antigonus of Carystus, was also a writer of wonder-tales and paradoxography. Writing about individuals was a literary activity akin to that of the novelist, not a scientific exercise. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff characterised Antigonus' work as follows:[33]

> The tone is throughout subjective, the narrator speaks not with that dispassionate tedium that the philistines have always taken for objectivity, because it is forbidden them to wax enthusiastic about any subject, but from personal understanding and personal sensibility.

Even in antiquity the art of biography came close to fiction, although Arnaldo Momigliano, in the classic account of the subject, insisted 'Nobody nowadays is likely to doubt that biography is some kind of history.'[34] He went on to define biography as 'an account of the life of a man from birth to death'.

There are a few statements by ancient writers that take us further. Polybius, when he began to describe the career of Philopoemen, reflected on this matter:

> It is strangely inconsistent in historians to record in elaborate detail the founding of cities, stating when and how and by whom they were established, and even the circumstances and difficulties which accompanied the transaction, and yet to pass over in complete silence the characteristics and aims of the men by whom the whole thing was done, though these are in fact the points of greatest value. For as one feels more roused to emulation and imitation by men that have life, than by buildings that have none, it is natural that the history of the former should have a greater educational value.[35]

Polybius goes on to emphasise that history differs from encomium, a tension alluded to by Cicero when he invites his friend Lucceius to write a biography of him (since autobiography, he thinks, requires too much modesty to make a realistic account!).[36] A biography of an individual, for Cicero, has to include elements of eulogy. (In his case, of course, no admixture of blame would be necessary.)

Plutarch went furthest in developing a theory of biography, in a famous passage from the beginning of his *Life of Alexander*:

> I am not writing history but biography, and the most outstanding exploits do not always have the property of revealing the goodness or badness of the agent; often, in fact, a casual action, the odd phrase, or a jest reveals character better than battles involving the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives, huge troop movements, and whole cities besieged.[37]

Plutarch, it is clear, saw a moral purpose in writing biography. This is a far cry from understanding character for its own sake; as for Polybius, an educational aim lies behind his work. Key moments are selected for judgement, and there is no sense of 'development' of a character. A modern biographer, as Tomas Hägg says, must enter into the mind of his subject.[38] But in this we are hampered by the lack of any kind of introspection or reflexivity in most ancient writings, Augustine and (perhaps) Cicero being the most notable

exceptions. Certainly there is no hint of individual personality in Xerxes' recorded writings, even the inscription (XPh) in which he expresses a kind of creed: 'The man who has respect for that law which Ahura Mazda has established, and worships Ahura Mazda and Arta reverently, he both becomes happy when living and becomes blessed when dead.' Did Xerxes think he had had a happy life?

It may have been the extreme lack of personal documents that made the writing by Greeks of biographies of Persian subjects so rare. The only real example is Plutarch's biography of the Persian King Artaxerxes II. Judith Mossman,[39] in a sensitive analysis of this *Life*, suggests that the Persian ruler provided a less satisfactory object on which to exercise the characteristic faculty of moral judgement; beginning with some signs of virtue, he is not just corrupted by prosperity – a trite judgement – but the personality actually disappears inside the office. Artaxerxes' role as king means that he can only be a king and tyrant; his personality is beside the point.

When Plutarch collected anecdotes for his *Sayings of Kings and Commanders* he could find only four relating to Xerxes – not enough to build up a philosophical picture of a man of action in his time. They convey an impression of caprice, of a king who could do or decree whatever he wanted, even something as absurd as ordering the Babylonians to cease from bearing arms and instead to devote themselves to song and dance, affairs with prostitutes and wearing long robes. Cornelius Nepos, having run through the most notable Greek statesmen and commanders, passed over the Persian kings in a brief paragraph, and Xerxes in a sentence (31.3): 'Xerxes is most notable for the fact that he led the largest army in human memory to war against Greece by land and sea.' True, but in no way a description of a 'life'.

That is why the art of the novelist may in some ways be the better way in to the understanding of an ancient individual. Some might say that Herodotus is more of a novelist than a historian: a current school of thought would reject him in favour of Persian sources every time.[40] But every history is an interpretation.[41] That is why I have given some rein to Gore Vidal's carefully researched novel, *Creation* (1981), in this book. Vidal was proud of this work, though the critical response was hostile and it is not the easiest of reads. Through the narrator, Cyrus Spitama, a friend of Xerxes and his ambassador to the courts of India, China and Greece, Vidal creates a detailed and nuanced historical portrait of the king. His novel remains true to the facts in as far as we know them, makes many intelligent interventions in controversial matters of historical interpretation, and produces a rounded portrait of Xerxes as a human being. At times one is almost overwhelmed by the amassed

circumstantial detail. He writes not as a scholar but as a connoisseur of human behaviour especially in the political arena. He does not swallow Herodotus whole but reads him as Herodotus would have wanted, with an eye to possibilities. The novelist can pretend to what the historian can never have, access to others' minds. Vidal's interpretation deserves to be given place alongside that of conventional historians, even though in the end I am not persuaded by his portrait of a Xerxes who succumbed to ennui and, after the Greek campaign, just 'couldn't be bothered'.[42] But I can see why he thinks it.

Similar serious consideration is, however, by no means due to the two other novelists I have from time to time quoted in these pages: Louis Couperus' *Arrogance* (1930) and F. Marion Crawford's *Zoroaster* (1885). The first is largely a rehash of the Herodotean narrative, with the leitmotif indicated by the title; no attempt at revaluation here. Crawford's novel is lurid and melodramatic, often absurd, with no sense of a researched attempt to understand the world he is writing about; but he occasionally has a good idea.

A very particular angle on Xerxes' personality is offered by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century drama and opera. Colley Cibber's play and Handel's *Serse* have already been mentioned, and Metastasio's libretto for *Temistocle* will feature in Appendix 1. The operas mostly focus on romantic entanglements and the magnanimity of the tyrant who turns to virtue, but they offer no real interpretative possibilities.[43] More may be gained from the biblical Book of Esther, which also casts Xerxes as a lover, but to rather different purpose. The erotic is an aspect that scarcely features in the Greek accounts. In the Greek writers, the dominant woman in Xerxes' life is his mother Atossa (another pre-echo of Alexander who was moulded by his forceful mother Olympias). The assassination of Xerxes is made by Herodotus the result of impermissible erotic desires, but they are of a kind that Greeks often attributed to Persians, and which echoed, as we shall see, through the stories of the Persian court that Ctesias gathered in his long residence there at the end of the fifth century.

In the Book of Esther, Xerxes' susceptibility becomes a virtuous trait, for his love for Esther results in magnanimous treatment of the whole Jewish population within the empire. We shall look more carefully at this story in Chapter 8, but there is little doubt that, fictional though it is, the King Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther stands for the historical Xerxes. The story in Esther is so different in character from anything in the Greeks (even Ctesias) that it brings home to us how dependent we are and always have been on the Greek authors for the picture we hold of Xerxes.

What have we learnt of Xerxes so far? He is an incompetent commander in war, and in private he is weepy, angry, cruel, arrogant, hedonistic, never

satisfied. In the Book of Esther he is a drunkard, ill-advised and excessively pliable.[44] Not an attractive mixture, to be sure, but for Vidal it is one that should make sense to an age that has lived through existentialism. Xerxes' vice, for Vidal, is ennui. Aelian (*VH* 14.2) tells us that the Persian king never went anywhere without a piece of wood, to while away the tedious hours by whittling. Ennui is the downside of freedom. Xerxes has everything, is free to do whatever he wants. He is condemned to be free and descends into a nihilistic listlessness. Nothing matters, he has seen it all before, life has no value (least of all that of others).

Furthermore, Xerxes knows he cannot live up to the greatness of his father, Darius. This is a regular theme of Persian writing about their kings: in the *Shahnameh* the father's values are constantly reasserted to the discomfiture of the son.[45] The same thing happens, for that matter, in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, and the failure of the free-thinker Bazarov is blamed on his *hybris*.[46] The Persian psyche turns the Oedipus complex upside down: 'the Iranian collective fantasy is anchored in an anxiety of disobedience that wishes for an absolute obedience. The sons, while desiring to rebel, know unconsciously that if they do so they might get killed, and so in a way they settle for the fear of castration.'[47]

Could this be the key to Xerxes' historical fate? He never grew out of the shadow of his father, and in the end he *couldn't be bothered*? Such evidence as we can muster from non-Greek sources should enable us to temper this negative picture, and show that in at least some respects his achievement was as great as his father's – even if he never quite realised it.

Xerxes the Builder

First of all there is archaeology. There is no doubt that Xerxes was a great builder. Both before and after the Greek campaign, he was busy with the completion of the palatial complex at Persepolis begun by Darius, and many of the buildings can be without doubt attributed to his reign and patronage. Alexander was careful to select for complete destruction only those edifices at Persepolis that had been built by Xerxes.[48] In Babylon too he was a builder. On some of those buildings there are inscriptions;[49] not only is the king depicted in splendour (even Herodotus [7.187] acknowledges the Persian king's magnificence – a virtuous trait at last), but his words are put up for all to see. They announce his devotion to Truth, Goodness and Justice, his religious toleration, as well as his devotion to the Mazdaean religion of the Achaemenids. Sadly, his preserved words are few (Darius has many more),[50]

and can be as easily dismissed as the platitudes of politicians. There are no diaries: probably the Persian kings could not even read and write, they had staff to do that for them. We should love to know more about the chronicles mentioned in Esther 6.1 and Ctesias.[51] Somehow a tradition became current that the Greek campaign was a victory, and the second-century AD rhetor Dio Chrysostom[52] tells us that he heard this as common knowledge in Persia. Anything the Persians might have written down may well have been destroyed in the aftermath of Alexander's conquest, but if oral tradition carried on stories of the Achaemenid kings, they seldom surface in our Greek sources.

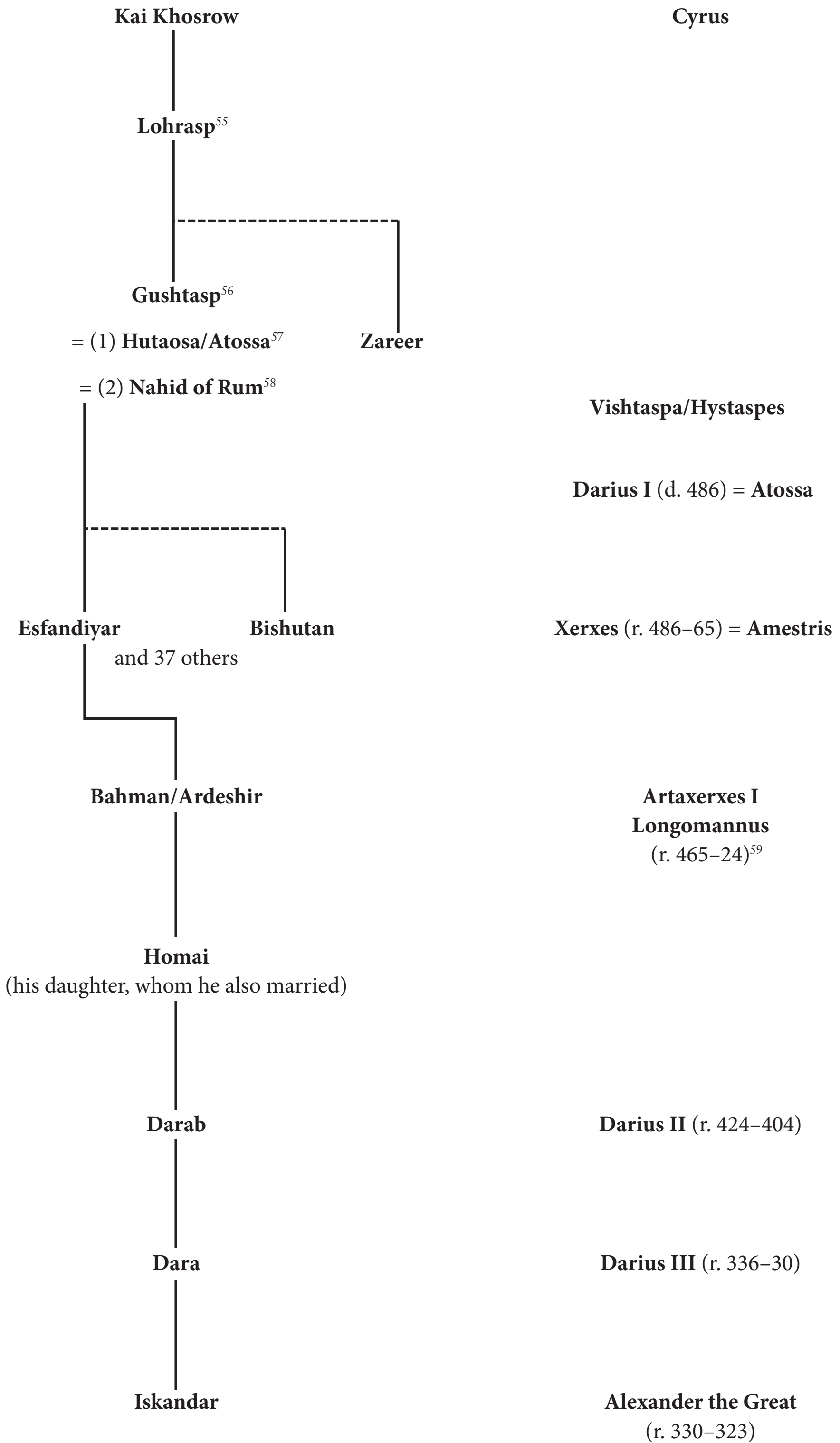
Increased study of archaeological and epigraphic data, including the cuneiform tablets from Persepolis and Babylon (see Chapters 2 and 4 for important revisions of traditional views), has highlighted inconsistencies between the Greek and Near Eastern records of the Persian Empire, sometimes to the Greeks' disadvantage; but they do not help much with the personality of the king.

Persian Versions

I have already suggested that there may be a Persian 'national character', expressed in certain reactions and tics, that can be helpful in constructing a portrait of Xerxes; in this I derive some support from the book of Gohar Homayounpour (2012), which provides a psychoanalytic portrait of the Persian soul. Persian poets have a particular outlook on life, which has become almost too familiar to Western readers through its brilliant mediation by Edward Fitzgerald in his recreation of the world of Omar Khayyam. Where the Greek outlook on life is tragic, in the sense that disaster may always be waiting around the corner, and no man may be called happy until he is dead, the Persian is a 'culture of mourning', in which the short-lived blossoming of the rose is a symbol of the shortness of life that will never come again and must be enjoyed while we can. Greeks were puzzled by this 'oriental' view, which they saw epitomised in the statue in 'Babylon'[53] of the Assyrian king Sardanapalus, 'snapping his fingers', 'for, apart from enjoyment, nothing else is worth as much as that'.[54] But this melancholy is not just an excuse for hedonism. It is an essentially conservative trait that doubts the ultimate value of all achievement. This view of life pervades even the stories of the great deeds of the kings and heroes of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.

It has always seemed surprising that there is almost no reflection of Achaemenid history in the Persian writings of later ages. When Ferdowsi came to write his *Shahnameh (Book of Kings*) in the tenth century

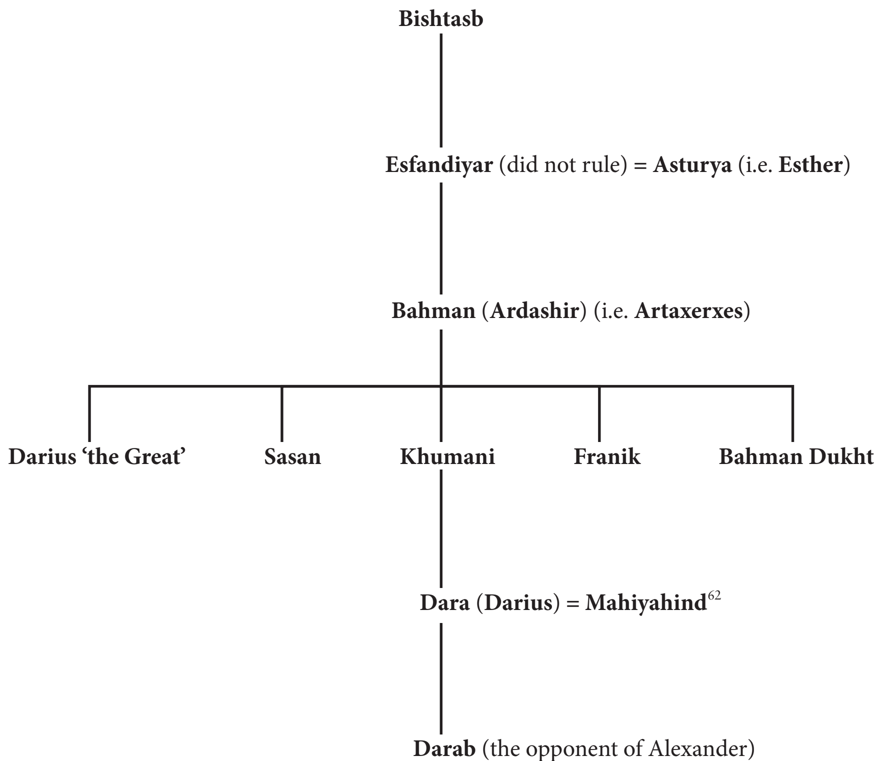
Table 2 The Legendary Genealogy of the Persian Kings



AD – basing it in large part on the lost Parthian *Khoday-nameh (Book of Lords*) – the place of the Achaemenid kings, between the purely legendary figures of the distant past and the arrival of Alexander the Great in Persia in 334 BC,[60] is taken by the legendary Kayanids. Kai Khosrow, the founder, is succeeded by Lohrasp, whose son is Gushtasp, whose name is the same as the Greek form Hystaspes, the father of Darius. In the nineteenth century it was assumed that the legendary and the historical genealogies could be matched up, as follows.

One of the best reasons for thinking that this legendary genealogy preserves some kind of historical memory is the name of Gushtasp (Hystaspes, also Vishtaspa), in whose reign, according to Ferdowsi, the prophet Zoroaster appeared and created a new Achaemenid religion. We will examine this tradition more closely in Chapters 1 and 4. The tenth-century Arab historian Tabari[61] has a variant of this genealogy, which attempts to reconcile different historical data:

Table 3 Tabari's Version of the Genealogy of the Persian Kings



In this account, Esfandiyar did not rule and Bahman succeeded Bishtasb. Bahman's daughter-wife Khumani (i.e. Homai in Persian) is said to have reigned for thirty years and to have built Istakhr (i.e. Persepolis).

The adventures of Esfandiyar (Isfendiyadh in Arabic) are recounted at length in both the *Shahnameh* (completed in 1010) and the *History of the Kings of Persia* by al-Tha'alibi (961/2–1037/8).[63] The latter's source was not Ferdowsi, but besides Persian texts he made use of Tabari and Ibn Khordadbeh. Imprisoned by his father Gushtasp as a suspected traitor, Esfandiyar is released to lead a campaign against the Turks, who are destroying the Persians' fire-temples. He captures the Turkish commander Kourksar, who is renowned for his cunning, trickery and bravery, and compels him to reveal to Esfandiyar the way to the City of Brass. This is a perilous journey of Seven Stages (Haft Khan); Esfandiyar defeats in turn a demon, a lion, an elephant and a dragon. He garrottes a witch with a chain impervious to her magic. He then has to deal with the *simurgh* (*anqa* in Arabic), a gigantic bird that can carry off elephants. He leads his army through a region of freezing cold and snow, which is dispelled by the power of prayer. This is followed by a desert, after which the City of Brass comes into view. Esfandiyar goes in disguise to the court of its ruler Arjasp, conquers his army and seizes the treasure of Afrasiab. He returns in triumph to his father, only to be set the further, impossible, task of capturing the invincible hero Rostam. His mother Katayoun begs him not to go, but he sets off nonetheless and is killed by Rostam who has the assistance of the simurgh.

This story of adventure, despite its catastrophic end, seems in several ways to be a calque on that of the victorious Alexander of the *Romance*: the propensity for disguises, the fight with a dragon, the visit to the City of Brass, are all known from Arabic versions of the Alexander story. Although neither of these authors mentions it, Qazvini has a story that it was Esfandiyar who built the wall against Gog and Magog that is normally attributed to Alexander.[64] (It could not, in fact, be in Ferdowsi since he makes this a deed of Alexander.) As in the Greek tradition, Xerxes/Esfandiyar has been modelled to be an inversion of the greater king who is to come. He fails in his earthly mission, whereas Alexander succeeds and his only failure is that he does not achieve immortality.

But can Esfandiyar really be the Xerxes of history? What seems to have happened is that during not only Alexander's brief reign but also the two centuries of the Seleucid Empire that succeeded him in most of Asia, many of the traditions of the rulers of Fars were forgotten – or perhaps suppressed by the Macedonian elite. When the Persian Empire was refounded by the

Parthians in 247 BC, displacing the Seleucids from the Iranian lands, the new rulers, originating from East Iran, and with a capital north of the Oxus at Hecatompylus in present-day Turkmenistan, brought their own stories and legends with them. These largely focused around tales of the northern marches of Persia and struggles with the Turanians (early Turks) such as Afrasiab, the opponent of Kai Khosrow. However, some names of the Achaemenid kings attached themselves in the confused way of oral legend to the exploits of the East Iranian heroes. The fact that the Parthian kings, too, hardly figure in the *Shahnameh* is to be explained by a further suppression of Parthian tradition by the Sassanian rulers who succeeded them.[65]

Our task is to determine whether any memory of what the Persian kings actually did also penetrates Ferdowsi and other medieval writers. Can we tell a story about Xerxes that uses the exploits of Esfandiyar? His name is probably a corrupt form of Sphendadates, which anchors him, at least precariously, in the Achaemenid story, since Sphendadates (meaning something like 'Law of Generosity') is the name of the false Magus disposed of by Darius in the account of Ctesias: Persian accounts call him Gaumata.[66]

Our results will, like our deployment of Gore Vidal's novel, be more suggestive than historical. Pierre Briant attempted something similar in his recreation of Darius III, *Darius dans l'ombre d'Alexandre*, in which he employed the traditions of the *Shahnameh* to recover something of a Persian viewpoint on that later and much more tragic Persian king. He had the advantage that Darius III is recognisable as a character in the *Shahnameh* and elsewhere, whereas the congruence of Esfandiyar and Xerxes is fleeting at best. However, Briant's principle can with some modifications be applied to the earlier king.

The aim of this book is to recreate something of what it was to be the ruler of the largest empire the world had yet seen, in the fifth century BC – and also to investigate how the dominant picture of Xerxes, which the modern world has inherited, came into being. The conflict with 'plucky little Greece' has come to be a defining image of European civilisation against the oriental 'Other'. When President Reagan coined the phrase 'the evil empire' to describe the world beyond the Iron Curtain, it was an echo of that immemorial conflict of east and west, a conflict that defined itself even more sharply as America's enemy became again a power based in the same geographical location as the ancient Persian Empire. Fortunately there are signs (2015) that the polarisation is becoming less intense. It will be to the good of us all to get beyond this dichotomy, to slip behind the curtain and see what it was really like to live – and to be a king – in Persia. More Greeks lived

under Persian rule at the beginning of the fifth century BC than in Greece itself. How did they accommodate themselves to imperial rule? Herodotus, Aeschylus and Ferdowsi are among the greatest writers in the world, but that does not mean the picture they paint of Persia is unvarnished truth.