



Aerial view of Salonika.

## ABSURDITY IN SALONIKA

Review: Clive Aslet, *The Birdcage*. London: Cumulus, 2014. Pp. 318. £18.95

*Emma Bridges*

Inspired by research for his moving 2013 non-fiction book *War Memorial*, journalist Clive Aslet's first novel is set in the cultural and political melting-pot that is Salonika (modern-day Thessalonika) during the First World War.

After a failed attempt to assist Serbia against Bulgarian aggression in 1915, Anglo-French forces established themselves on the so-called 'Macedonian Front' for the duration of the conflict; the 'birdcage' of the novel's title is the fortified line, constructed of several miles

of barbed wire, which was set up to separate the city from the conflict zone.

The location has thus far received little attention from other fiction writers who have set their work against the backdrop of the 1914-18 war. As the novel highlights, the rich assortment of national and cultural identities to which the city played host during this period makes for a fascinating opportunity to explore the interactions between the locals (themselves from a mix of Jewish, Ottoman and Greek backgrounds) and their military visitors. Aslet's focus

is thus less on the horrors of the war itself – although he does touch, for example, on the privations endured by those fighting in the hostile mountainous territory – than on the personalities and interactions of his characters, situated within painstakingly-drawn descriptions of this unique location.

Combining elements of the faintly absurd (although Aslet is at pains to suggest in his Author's Note that, 'Nearly everything in this book could have happened') with a wryly-observed image of the social scene in occupied Salonika,

along with the military escapades and affairs of the heart into which his characters enter, the author paints a picture which lightly pokes fun at both the stereotyped image of the British officer class (who here live a life

***‘Some of the character-types call to mind those of Blackadder’***

which mimics ‘expat culture’ as best they can under the circumstances) and at the officers’ equally stereotyped views of foreigners.

Aslet’s caricatures, drawn, one suspects, with tongue firmly planted in cheek, make for an entertaining cast.

His British officers bear nicknames like ‘Winner’ (failed military pilot, now turned war artist, and unlikely comic hero, whom we first encounter suspended in a kite balloon in his attempt to draw the enemy lines from the air). And they are frequently to be found in pursuit – with varying degrees of success – of their familiar home comforts, from cigarettes to roast goose for Christmas lunch.

The hapless bunch, almost inevitably it seems, fall desperately in love with the nursing staff who serve in the British Women’s Hospital, where they find themselves on more than one occasion.

Swelling the novel’s cast is an assortment of non-Brits, among them a German flying ace, von Erfurtwege (nicknamed ‘Earwig’), the French General Menière (affectionately known as ‘Manure’ by the English-speakers) and a sinister Turkish figure, Gazmend Effendi, who may or may not

be a spy.

The locals of Salonika, meanwhile, capitalise on the opportunity to boost their income by providing services for the newcomers; chief among these opportunists are the proprietors of Molho’s café, scene of many an assignation and romantic encounter.

The result is a gently-meandering, quirky narrative which denies generic classification, weaving as it does elements of romance, adventure story and comic novel as it follows the main British characters (particularly ‘Winner’ and his pal Captain ‘Sunny’ Southall, Commander of the Kite Balloon Section) through a series of amusing exploits ranging from military mishaps and revelations of intrigue to romantic trysts with the objects of their affections – some less well-chosen than others.

While some of the character-types call to mind – for this reader at least – those of the British television comedy *Blackadder*, the backdrop could hardly be more different. The filth of the trenches is exchanged for the café culture and social scene of the town in which this eccentric assortment of characters have found themselves.

For those who like their war novels gritty and realistic, *The Birdcage* is unlikely to hit the mark. Yet for readers who enjoy a less serious take on historical fiction, Aslet’s debut novel presents itself as an entertaining holiday read. It opens a new window, offering a fresh, and imaginatively realised, perspective on this little-known front of the First World War.

**ARMAND  
LEROI  
WINS 2015  
RUNCIMAN  
AWARD**

Report by **Paul Watkins**

This year’s Runciman Award, organized by the Anglo-Hellenic League and given for a work covering some aspect of Greece or the world of Hellenism, was announced on 18th June at the Hellenic Centre, London in the presence of Angeliki Papademetriou of the National Bank of Greece.

In his opening remarks, the newly elected Chairman of the League, Mr Gerald Cadogan, thanked the National Bank of Greece for their generous sponsorship of the Award. He then introduced this year’s Chairman of the Panel of Judges: Dr Chris Burnand, Head of Classics at Abingdon School.

The other judges were Professor Thomas Harrison, the Rathbone Professor of Ancient History and Classical Archaeology at Liverpool University; Dr Dionysios Stathakopoulos, Lecturer in Byzantine Studies at King’s College London; and Mr Dionysios Kapsalis, Director of the Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece.

After a detailed review of the shortlisted titles, Dr Burnand described the winner, *The Lagoon: How*



*Aristotle Invented Science* by Armand Leroi, as the most difficult of the whole entry to categorise.

‘This study of Aristotle’, he said, ‘was one focused on one of the least studied of all his texts, the *Historia animalium*.’

It also has the freshness of a book written by an outsider – for its author is not a classicist but a Professor of Evolutionary Biology. Given the dryness of Aristotle’s text it is an enormous achievement to have produced such a readable book – a genuine page-turner from its opening in an Athens bookshop, on to the lagoon of the title on Lesbos, then Aristotle’s dissections, and finally on to the focused discussion of Aristotle’s actual achievement.

The book is particularly strong – and even controversial – on Aristotle’s reaction to Plato, but it does not shy away from what Aristotle got wrong. Leroi also clearly disentangles later developments, so avoiding the pitfalls of anachronistic readings of Aristotle, and indeed asks why Aristotle could not take that final step towards the discovery of evolution.

These qualities all contribute to the clarity with which the book makes its case for Aristotle’s actual achievement. None of us could put it down, and we think it will introduce the biological works of Aristotle to a much wider audience than previously, and do so in a tremendously eloquent way.

For that reason it was our unanimous choice as winner of the 2015 Runciman Prize.’



*Aristotle with a bust of Homer, Rembrandt, 1653.*

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## FORMIDABLE ARISTOTLE

Review: Armand Marie Leroi, *The Lagoon: How Aristotle Invented Science*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. Pp. 512. £25

**Benjamin Temblett**

Depending on where you stand, to say that Aristotle is not famed for his literary eloquence is either a generous understatement or a grievous overstatement.

Cicero famously found his style to be a ‘flowing river of gold’. Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, in an 1887 essay reviewing a book on the art of conversation by the classicist JP Mahaffy, lamented that the author ‘has not merely followed the scientific method of Aristotle

which is, perhaps, excusable... he has adopted the literary style of Aristotle for which no excuse is possible.’

If, then, Armand Marie Leroi is on a mission to prove that ‘Aristotle’ and ‘eloquence’ can co-exist without quarrel in the same sentence, he has done just that – even if the literary style is attributable to Leroi himself rather than his subject.

*The Lagoon* is a deft, refreshingly accessible and beautifully written study of

Aristotle's thought.

Leroi, Professor of Evolutionary Developmental Biology at Imperial College London, modestly offers the reader a 'scientist's apologia', but such precautions are hardly necessary.

***'An Aristotelian odyssey pulsating with both animated passion and measured understanding'***

His exploration, ostensibly of 'the scientific works that Aristotle wrote and taught', is rich in all the context necessary to make this study far more transcendental than its single-discipline subtitle suggests.

Crucially, it builds on its biological base to ask an essential, unashamedly constructive question: where does Aristotle's thought fit into modern science, and by extension the modern world at large?

For Leroi, the question can be answered through an appropriately organic metaphor; Aristotle's 'ideas flow like a subterranean river through the history of our science, surfacing now and then as a spring, with ideas that are apparently new but are, in fact, very old.' Flowing river of gold, indeed.

Through a process of intellectual osmosis, science's greatest minds have 'absorbed the structure of Aristotle's thought... And so his thought became our thought, even when we do not know it.'

To illustrate this process, Leroi explores the specifics (or, in some instances, the not-so specifics) of Aristotle's biological cataloguing amidst a social, cultural and scientific context that bridges the historical and the contemporary; for example, a discussion of Aristotle's account

of the physiology of shark's faces in *Historia animalium* takes place amidst analysis of Aristotle's own *Metaphysics* and his views on the oikos, Plato's *Timaeus*, Darwinism, the issue of ecological instability and modern studies on predator-prey dynamics.

This sheer exuberance of context and variety of thought, typical of *The Lagoon* as a whole, underscores one of Leroi's most poignant themes; by using the physical world, with its often relatively unchanging (and thus comparable) natural phenomena, as a gateway to observation, inquiry and analysis, we can understand Aristotle as part of an evolving dialogue and reap untold intellectual rewards.

Reading Aristotle as a biologist, Leroi says, is advantageous because 'our theories are linked to his not only by descent but by the fact that they seek to explain the same phenomena. It may be then that they aren't so different from ours.' The approach is an invigorating one, a creative reception that emphasises the palpable continuum sensed by anyone with even a passing interest in the history of thought.

Amidst the unbridled optimism of the project, Leroi is quick to note the perilous risks of mis-attributing thoughts to Aristotle which simply aren't there. Accordingly, he is as open about Aristotle's mis-steps as he is about his triumphs. Paradoxically, some of Aristotle's greatest and most innovative strengths, such as his all-encompassing desire to order and structure the world around him (Leroi reminds us 'Aristotle reduced the chaos of the world to order, for he was, if nothing else, a systems man') may have facilitated some of his greatest errors and honed his worst self-contradictions.

Leroi's study invites the reading that, amidst a constant state of haunting socio-political

flux punctuated by war and the instability of Greek states, Aristotle was a man searching for a robust, holistic structure in the face of strife. His biology was precisely that, a study of different ecologies, different anatomies, all struggling to survive in the face of the greatest strife of all, nature. Difference was everywhere, fighting against flux; to unite that difference under one umbrella, using its struggle for survival as an explanation, might just have sated Aristotle's thirst for system-building.

As Leroi notes, though, 'Aristotle never made the evolutionary leap... That he had the materials for an evolutionary theory at hand is, of course, evident only in hindsight...'

There is surely solace to be found, however, in the fact that Aristotle's role in the eventual leap is at least in part assured, for Leroi continues, 'We may read Aristotle in Darwin'.

Regardless of the merits, or

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otherwise, of Aristotle's literary style, Darwin, like many of his fellow scientists and thinkers, found in Aristotle's thought and scientific method the 'flowing river of gold' that Cicero so revered. Leroi's *Lagoon*, an Aristotelian odyssey pulsating with both animated passion and measured understanding, provides us with a compelling argument as to why we should keep searching that river for a fresh dusting of gold.





Stone relief from the audience hall at Persepolis, 6th-5th century BC.

## THE GREEKS IN ASIA

Review: John Boardman, *The Greeks in Asia*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2015. Pp. 240. £32

**Paul Cartledge**

**S**ir John Boardman's plethora of book publications extends back well over 50 years - he can boast three whole pages on Amazon.co.uk. The standard he has achieved has remained consistently and astonishingly high, my own favourites (speaking as a former doctoral pupil) being *Preclassical* (Penguin, 1967) and *The Greeks Overseas* (4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1999; also Thames & Hudson, as so many have been). *The Greeks in Asia*, 'a study of the Greeks, the "Greek" and the more broadly "classical" in Asia', is published in his eighty-eighth year.

Over those decades he has not

been untouched by controversy – far from it. His sparring partners have included L.R. Palmer (the dating of the Knossos Linear B tablets), Michael Vickers and David Gill jointly (the relative ancient valuation of Greek silverware and painted pots), and all sorts and conditions of 'new' archaeologists, among them his very first Oxford doctoral student, Anthony Snodgrass. But perhaps the most consequential of all these controversies, at least for a historical archaeologist (or 'crypto-archaeologist', JB's own term) such as myself, has been the long-running dispute over the relationship of

priority, aesthetic-qualitative as well as chronological, versus mutual indebtedness between 'the Greeks and their eastern neighbours', in T.J. Dunbabin's (1957) language.

Two pressure points obtrude. The first came in the ninth and eighth centuries BC(E), when the 'eastern neighbours' in acute question were the Phoenicians. The Greeks themselves acknowledged at least one major part of their debt to this enigmatic people, by bestowing upon them the name by which they're still currently known (we don't know what they actually called themselves) and by labelling their own alphabetic writing

system 'Phoenician letters'. Here one could argue that for once they were actually being too modest: the Phoenician, like all semitic scripts, was non-vocalic, whereas Greeks not only invented the world's first fully phonetic alphabetic script but also passed it on to the Etruscans who passed it on to the Romans and so ultimately to us Anglophones and Anglographs. But that admission or concession didn't stop them from also tarring the Phoenicians with the brush of being merely profit-maximising mercantile crooks and cheats. They certainly were in no rush to give them the credit, as some modern scholars would wish to, for independently devising a

***'Over the decades he had not been untouched by controversy – far from it'***

viable city-state political culture and a formidably impressive and influential artistic repertoire.

Some scholars indeed, Martin Bernal perhaps egregiously so, have wished to go even further and see the classical Greeks as the cultural debtors to oriental or Middle Eastern (Egyptian) mentors across the board, but that's a can of worms that Boardman probably wisely does not venture to reopen here. Two decades ago, in a somewhat anticipatory *tour de force* of comparative art-historical survey ranging from Etruria to north India, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity*, he had been less reticent.

The other major pressure point is of course the later fourth century BCE and the conquests of Alexander. Here, too, Boardman does not shy away from controversy.

In the Preface he states, twice over, that 'The Greeks

were not empire-builders'. Not most of them, for sure, but Alexander? Boardman is adamant that Alexander was, despite his mother's DNA, in no useful sense Greek, asserting as much both in the chapter

***'Boardman is adamant that Alexander was, despite his mother's DNA, in no useful sense Greek'***

significantly entitled 'Greeks and Alexander "the Great"' and in a brief Epilogue on the Greeks' own mythology or myth-history of their relations with the orient. He begins the latter by quoting from an essay by Plutarch on the for him unquestionably Greek Alexander's fortune or virtue, and then from the first century BCE/CE geographico-cultural historian, Strabo of Amaseia: 'our mode of life has spread its change for the worse to almost all peoples...'. Boardman's commentary is perhaps surprisingly damning of Plutarch and indeed the Greeks more generally: 'their own history obliged many of them to pretend that Alexander was really a Greek who pursued Greek moral aims. Strabo was, uncharacteristically, more honest about Greek influence in the east'.

Between the Preface and the Epilogue Boardman surveys in turn the Black Sea region, the Levant and Persia, Central Asia and China, and northwest India, all of them illuminated by serviceable and very necessary maps, and illustrated - the T&H hallmark - by a host of well-reproduced colour (46) and black-and-white images (153, several of them line-drawings by the author himself). A timeline of events, rulers and objects would have been helpful, and even a mere list of the illustrations. But the captions do a lot to make up

for that, and some of the images are both unfamiliar (at least to me) and hugely informative. For convenience of reference I single out the four artefacts represented on facing pages as colour illustrations VI to IX.

VI is the regrettably headless, late-fifth-century BCE marble statue of a seated woman from Persepolis (the Persians' Parsa), which featured also in the British Museum's unfortunately titled 2005 exhibition 'A Forgotten Empire'. Boardman shares the view that she probably represents the mourning Penelope, but generously prefers to see her as a diplomatic gift to the Great King from a Greek vassal state rather than as mere plunder. VII and VIII are both in some sense portraits of Alexander of the late fourth century: VII, a unicum, is a gold coin of unspecified manufacture from an unspecified Afghan hoard; VIII is an elbaite (variety of tourmaline) gemstone, of unstated provenance, with a tiny Kharoṣṭhī (Indian, from ancient Gandhara) inscription at the king's neck. IX is the late-fifth century Athenian red-figure jug now in Hamburg (quite notorious since K.J. Dover's *Greek Homosexuality*, 1978), on which a bearded, naked and penis-wielding Greek warrior is depicted advancing menacingly on a trousered and quivered as well as quivering Persian, to the accompaniment of a painted inscription that reads 'I am Eurymedon. I stand bent over'.

John Boardman dedicates *The Greeks in India* to his daughter. It is a noble gift, and one trusts that she will be as respectful of her father's great work and indeed oeuvre as Thucydides' daughter apparently was of hers. For those who wish to pursue the story of Hellenic or hellenizing cultural outreach in Asia, right down to the present day, the Byzantinist Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads* (Bloomsbury, 2015) is strongly recommended.

# XERXES REDISCOVERED

Review: Richard Stoneman, *Xerxes: A Persian Life*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. 275. £25

*Joseph Skinner*

Richard Stoneman's *Xerxes: A Persian Life* offers a highly engaging and broadly sympathetic take on a figure widely regarded as one of history's greatest villains - a vacillating and tyrannical despot notorious for his vain pride, unbridled lust and vengeful cruelty.

Xerxes is remembered primarily for his failed invasion of Greece at the head of a vast, polyglot army and very little else, in spite of the fact that this incident played a relatively minor role in a rule that lasted from 486-465 BC.

The book's aims are twofold: to 'recreate something of what it was to be the ruler of the largest empire the world had yet seen', and to explore how modern perceptions of Xerxes (Khshayarsha in Old Persian) came to be so unswervingly negative despite purportedly favourable treatment by Herodotus and the Athenian playwright Aeschylus, whose dramatization in the immediate aftermath of the Greek naval victory at Salamis in 480 BC is the earliest Greek tragedy to survive from antiquity (although whether it displays any real sympathy for the sufferings of the Persians has been disputed).

Rather than attributing this negative image to anti-barbarian rhetoric that emanated from Athens both during and after the Persian Wars, Stoneman points the finger of blame at Alexander the Great and those chronicling his deeds, arguing that they and not earlier authors were the source of traditions that were subsequently amplified, transmitted or distorted still further by later writers and musicians ranging from the hugely successful Handel and J.S. Bach to the rather less celebrated

Colley Cibber, whose *Xerxes* proved a colossal flop when it opened in 1699 (its reception was deemed too poor to merit a second performance).

Stoneman's thoughtful 'character sketch' of the Achaemenid monarch seeks to supplement and qualify this rather two-dimensional image with a wide variety of Persian materials drawn from both the Achaemenid era (Persian Royal Inscriptions and iconography) and later periods including Ferdowsi's 10th century epic *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) and Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*. In doing so it relies heavily on the groundbreaking work of the Achaemenid History Workshop, whose concerted bid to divest Persian history from the biases and stereotypes of Greek and Roman authors led to the creation of a new field of study (Achaemenid Studies) - a debt Stoneman is keen to acknowledge.

In a tentative bid to flesh out our knowledge of the man, Stoneman identifies certain aspects of Xerxes' character that are either routinely overlooked or else viewed from a Greek perspective: Xerxes' efforts to defend and consolidate the empire, his efforts as royal builder (most notably at Persepolis), gardener and occasional musings indicating that he may have been prone to the sort of melancholy with which Persian poetry is suffused.

The opening chapters of Stoneman's book provide a useful introduction to both the reign of Xerxes and the way in which aspects of the latter were subsequently re-imagined or represented by later authors, musicians and playwrights, the rise of the Achaemenid Empire, and the many challenges and pitfalls

surrounding (modern) attempts to write ancient biography. The book then goes on to deal with the ideology of Achaemenid kingship and traditions of kingly self-representation before examining Xerxes' beliefs in the light of what is widely perceived to be a culture of tolerance which is seen by many to be one of the defining characteristics of the Achaemenid Empire. Two chapters discuss Xerxes' invasion of Greece after which we are treated to insightful analysis of Xerxes' building programme at Persepolis, his erotic pursuits, and the circumstances surrounding his untimely death at the hands of an assassin.

Well-written and illustrated, the book is supported by a helpful array of maps, genealogical tables and appendices on Xerxes in Opera and Drama, stories surrounding the birth of Persian kings, the chronology of Xerxes' invasion of Greece. It will provide enjoyment and illumination to both academic audiences and the general reader (for whom it is equally well-suited).

The overall tone and content of the book is a symptom of the progressive thawing of relations between Iran and the West in recent weeks and months. Rather than subscribing to the bald distinction between Greek and Barbarian Other, this book explores the motivations and character of the Great King, Xerxes, with great sensitivity, wit and no little panache. In doing so it puts a human face to an empire long assumed to be the antithesis of western values and culture. For this and much more it deserves to be applauded.