A first glance at the current manuals on Persian history would suggest that we are well acquainted with the personality of Xerxes, king of the Achaemenid empire from his accession in 486 till his murder in 465. Born the son of Atossa, the daughter of Cyrus the Great, during the kingship of his father Darius he was raised mostly in the harem (Plato Leges 694D). His father nominated him as his successor (XPl 30–32, Hdt. 7.1–2) either for dynastic reasons or because of the influence of his mother at court. Soon after his accession to the throne he had to cope with rebellions in Egypt and Babylonia. The Babylonian revolt in particular was the prelude to a new policy towards subject populations: Xerxes did not attempt to continue the well-known Achaemenid policy of respecting national and religious feelings reflected in titles such as 'king of Babylon, king of lands', but henceforth called himself merely 'king of lands', thus showing overt disregard for Babylonian national pride most clearly demonstrated by the removal of the cult-statue of Marduk from its sanctuary (Hdt. 1.183). A few years later he ventured on an expedition against Greece at the head of an enormous army that was brought together after three years of preparations.

Notwithstanding the huge expedition-force and a few initial successes, Xerxes' fleet was defeated at Salamis and the king departed hastily from Greek soil, leaving behind his general Mardonius and a number of picked troops. Mardonius did not fare better than his master and in 479 the remainder of the Persian army was destroyed at Plataea. Back in his own territory Xerxes apparently gave up

*This chapter was originally published in L. de Meyer and E. Haerinck (eds.) Archaeologia Iranica et Orientalis Miscellanea in Honorem Louis Vanden Berghe Peeters, Gent, 1989, 549–560.
plans for a conquest of Greece and devoted his time to two matters: building and women. On this second matter, we are apparently 'well-informed': apart from Herodotus' mention of the intervention of Atossa in the succession to the throne (7.3), and another reference to the behaviour of Amestris, Xerxes' wife, who had sacrificed in old age seven young Persian men and seven girls to the god of the underworld as a substitute for herself (Hdt. 7.114), we have the famous episode of Xerxes' infatuation with his niece Artaynte, a dramatic story that resulted in the death of Xerxes' full brother Masistes and his whole family (9.108–113). Xerxes' building-activities are very well known, both from the extant remains and from a number of inscriptions. Much of what is now still visible at Persepolis, was completed or constructed during Xerxes' reign, in particular the most impressive palace, the Apadana, was finished by him. His portrait once adorned the central and most conspicuous place on the reliefs but was removed to the Treasury at some point after his death, possibly as a result of the confused situation at court after the palace-conspiracy to which not only Xerxes, but also his designated successor and eldest son Darius fell victim.

The Sources

These biographical outlines are based on a variety of sources: the most important and most elaborate being Herodotus' description of Xerxes' campaign in books six to nine of the Histories. Evidence from other sources, royal inscriptions, Babylonian documents and archeological evidence complements or confirms the picture. As a result, our conclusions on the personality of Xerxes, his character and psychological demeanor seem well established: he was a bigot, passionate and a neurasthenic (Dunlop 1912: 74), he was self-righteous (Cook 1983: 122), he was very much in the shadow of, and under the influence of his father (Frye 1983: 126), a sovereign of indolent nature (Arborio Mella 1979: 72), no easy master (Burn 1985: 331), a womaniser whose most impressive construction was the harem-building (Nyberg 1954: 98), a creature motivated by passion rather than by reason (Immerwahr 1966: 177). In short, Xerxes was a weak personality whose faults showed mostly in his religious fanaticism, in his aesthetic enjoyment of beautiful surroundings and he wasted his time on women of pernicious influence at the cost of state-affairs.