

The Inevitability of the Murder of Darius III by His Own Man

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ABSTRACT

As the last emperor of a dynasty lasted for 200 years Darius III's death happen so quickly and was covered with a veil of mystery. After the battle of Guagamela, he still controlled what is now eastern Iran and Turkmenistan/Afghanistan and thus had the capacity to organize another army to fight, and indeed it was its intention. Why Darius's officers chose to murder their king if Darius clearly have the potential to turn the table? This essay discusses the inevitability of Darius death from four aspects, his lineage, his battles, and the miserable consequences of those battles, and finally the power structure of the empire.

Keywords: *Darius III, Achaemenid Empire, Bessus, Persepolis.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1831, during the excavation of the ancient Rome ruin of Pompeii in Naples, Italy, a relatively well-preserved mosaic was discovered by archaeologists, which is later thought to depict the battle of Issus. The picture shows the last moment of the battle of Issus. On the left, Alexander leaded a charge with his cavalries and he was piercing a Persian horseman. On the right, Darius was perching on his chariot, with his praetorians crowded around him. Darius's body leaned forward, his eye opens wide, a look of shock on his face, and his driver swung his whip hard to try to drive the chariot back for Darius's life. The character of the last emperor of the Achaemenid dynasty is known by modern people through the Alexander mosaic, which depicts the last moment of the battle of Issus, and Darius was killed by his generals a few years later after this battle, from this point on, a

dynasty which had lasted for more than 200 years ended. The coup organized to overthrow Darius happened so quickly and impulsively, it is worth to discuss what led these educated satraps (full of knowledge of feudal loyalty in their head) made such rash decision. What led to Darius's death? What was the likelihood of his surviving and gathered another army in the very east of his remaining territory? I will argue that his death in the coup was an unavoidable result. We should take four factors into consideration when examine the motivation of these satraps: Darius's status as a distant member of the branch of the last emperor (Artaxerxes III) and the way he reached the throne, his defeats after the battles he shouldn't lose because his preponderance in soldiers; the consequence of these defeats, the sack of Persepolis and his peace overtures, finally, the change in the balance of power and the special structure of the Achaemenid empire.



Figure 1 Darius III,

2. DARIUS'S LINEAGE

Darius was indeed a member of the inner circle of the royal family, but he was not a direct descent of the last emperor; also, he reached the throne with the help of a ruthless eunuch, who committed the crime of murdering Artaxerxes III and his sons. According to Diodorus, after the death of Artaxerxes and his sons, the royal house was extinct and there was no one could inherit the throne by the family tie, so the accession of Darius III was actually a compromise and violated Persian practice in theory [1]. Similarly, if we turn to the famous Greek source, the letter from Alexander to Darius, a similar statement can be found, “You assassinated Arses (Artaxerxes III’s son) with the help of a eunuch, and seized the throne unjustly, and in contravention of Persian law....[2]” From what has been discussed above, an interesting figure is ushered

out, the eunuch-Bagoas. A “militant rough eunuch’ in Diodorus’s word, put Darius III on the throne after he poisoned Artaxerxes III and his sons for manipulating the empire.[3] Although it was common to see the courtier supporting the new emperor in the later period of the empire, it was undoubtedly illegal in the eyes of the majority of aristocracies for the emperor to have close relation with the kingslayer. Therefore, Darius’s succession was already illegitimate from the beginning and combined with the phenomenon that the courtiers can support the new emperor, the seed of rebellion was sown. In brief, even though Darius III was a legitimate royal member, he was not a direct descent of the last emperor; also, he was supported by a kingslayer when he reached the throne, which weakened the legality of his succession. Combining this background with the forthcoming evidences of this essay, the reason why he was killed will be evident.

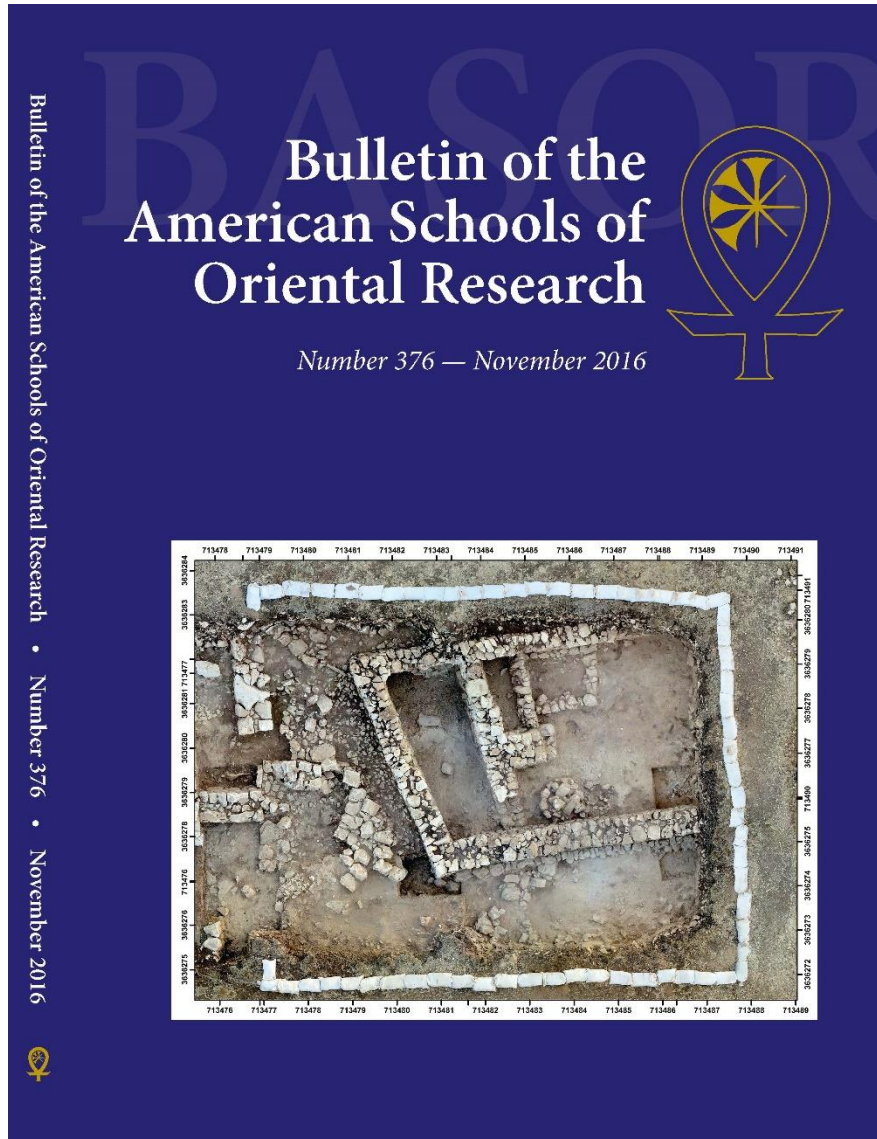


Figure 2 Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research

3. BATTLES WITH THE FORMER SLAVES

So far this essay has focused on Darius III's lineage; the following section will discuss the battles he fought (or happened during his reign) and why the result of these battles also contributed to his death. Regarding the first battle, the battle of Granicus, Darius did not attend in person; instead he chose to let the satraps handle it [4]. Darius had no reason to be afraid of a 20 years old kid who just accessed the throne (Alexander), and because of this, Darius did not see the need to strengthen the defense of his west Asia territory and he was limiting the power of his most talented general (Memnon) in case of he became too powerful, after all, Darius just got out of a royal succession farce and he would not allow the satrap had power over than him.. [5] With the fighting over, this decision would prove to be extremely foolish because Alexander now acquired the footholds in the Asia Minor, and the whole Asia was now open to the victor.[6] The Persian empire now precipitated in a unheard-of situation

in which the citadel of Sardis was captured for the first time in the empire's history and the adversary still was marching without any obstacles. Furthermore, Alexander now got rid of his financial predicament after this battle because he now had the control over the Persian treasuries along the Asian minor coast [7]. It was the moment that Persian nobilities start to lose faith at Darius, because of this poor judgement, the west Asia defense now fell, but the result of the following battle made these emotional feelings even stronger. After the battle of Granicus, Darius finally decided to attend the battle, then the battle of Issus happened. Darius's army outnumbered Alexander's at least at 2:1 ratio, but under his command, the Persian army collapsed, and Darius fled before Alexander even closed to him, letting his Persian fellows cut into pieces by the Macedonian [8]. This time Alexander had the chance to enter the empire's hinterland, his general stormed the Persian cities after the battle and the attempt from Persian to recapture failed frequently (e.g. Alexander's generals also, distinguished

leaders, had invaded many places: Calas Paphlagonia, Antigonus Lycaonia; Balacrus, having vanquished Hydarnes...) (Quintus Curtius). Also, the Persian navy suffered tremendous losses after the battle, it is said by some historian that the navy remind of nothing but 'some small residual groups of pirate ships' [9]. What made the matter worse was that Darius even abandoned his mother and daughter and let them capture by Alexander, which indisputably brought negative effects on Darius's prestige. As regard to the last battle, the battle of Gaugamela, although Darius was able to gather more soldiers, even elephants from his east province [10], he did the same thing, deserting all his troops and the significant commanders, ran himself [11]. Furthermore, the Persian capitals of Babylon and Susa were occupied by Alexander while Darius was running, and it was argued that Darius have the audacity to give the order of surrender without resistances because he hoped this policy will keep Alexander busied with dazzling distractions and therefore gave him time to organize another army to pay for his defeats (Diodorus). In brief, the battles that Darius fought or made decisions on all lost, and the consequence of these battles caused the end of the Achaemenid dynasty. Darius left his armies to be massacred by the former slaves of Persian, twice, and gave up the capitals without hesitation to allow himself to organize another army, which definitely deepened the discontent among the nobilities.

4. THE CONSEQUENCES

Before proceeding to examine the sack of Persepolis, it is necessary to discuss why the peace overtures proposed by Darius also irritated the Persian. After the battle of Issus and Gaugamela Darius proposed several overtures, all of them contained the provisions of cession of territory, which was unheard of in the Persian history [12]. Also, some ancient historians claimed that the way these territories ceded was through the form of dowry, which was a banal way the conquer used to justify their conquest *post eventum* back then, therefore, the proposal made by Darius was a recognition that the slaves officially occupied dynastic territory. If the Persian nobilities were losing their faith in their emperor because of his behaviors/decisions in and after the battles, then the sack of Persepolis was no doubt the end of this process, Darius's authority completely gone after the sack, and the aristocrats got the motivation to kill their king. After the battle of Gaugamela, Alexander marched toward the Persian capital Persepolis, and when Alexander arrived in this capital city, he allowed the Macedonian to plunder and enslave the city without any restrictions, because this city was hideous and the predecessor of Darius III launched unjust wars against the Greek here for centuries, and now the Greek presented here, not as the slaves, but with arm [13]. By contrast, it was a disaster if you understand the sack from Persian perspective. Persepolis was not only an administrative center, but also the cosmic

center of kingship, the crux between the vice-gerency of Ahura Mazda, that Aryan, that Achaemenid crowned by that 'Righteousness and truth'... (Arrian). Generations of Persian emperor lived and buried here, now the former slaves came and burned the palaces of the emperors and looted their mausoleums and treasury. After the sack Darius accelerated his escape, but not for long, the outraged satraps soon killed him while he was running away, after all, if a eunuch could make Darius an emperor, the generals certainly also capable to support the new one and replaced the incompetent.

5. AMBITIOUS GENERALS

Having discussed some of the outcomes of the defeats, we should note that these defeats changed the balance of power, the Macedonian now hold the initiative, and this could be another factor led to Darius's death. According to Briant, the unity of the Persian empire was achieved through uncontested supremacy of the Great King. There was not an ideology of the empire like nation-state to evoke empire's people to fight for Darius, and people's allegiance could be transferred to anyone who endowed with prestige, even if that person was a conquer [15]. Darius's defeats deprived him of the authority to rule, therefore, self-respecting satraps lurked ambitiously around the emperor and there was no lack of some very qualified emperor candidates among the satraps, especially Bessus. Bessus already was preeminent in the Persian aristocracies before the coup he organized against Darius. As the satrap of Bactria, he controlled the Bactria cavalry and fought alongside the Great King in the battle of Gaugamela, and his status as a kinsman of the Achaemenid royal family was even more exalted, therefore some historian claim Bessus's succession after Darius's murder was justifiable, because he was the next emperor in the succession line [16]. A satraps who had Achaemenid blood in his vein and have the supports from all except Artabazus and the Greek mercenaries, whatever his intention was, the satrap certainly had the motivation to stab Darius to death.

6. CONCLUSION

From the evidence shown above, we can see that Darius III could not avoid death in the coup. Darius's gained the crown unjustly, and he needed the victory in the battles against Alexander to solidify his throne. Unfortunately, all the battles he fought lost, piles of Persian corpses in the battlefield told the Persian nobilities how incompetent Darius is, let along he always ran himself every time. The consequence of the defeats of these battles was too heavy for he to assume, facing the humiliation and atrocity the Greek impose upon their ancestors and people, along with the circumstance that competent satraps lurked around the failed emperor, the aristocracies finally decided to kill Darius, although impulsively. Apart from the evidences discussed, further

research could be conducted for a more comprehensive examination, for example the personality of the parties involved, some ancient source claims that Darius's Greek mercenary used to suggest Darius replaced the royal guard with Greek mercenary because they noticed the turmoil among the nobilities, but Darius rejected this suggestion because he did not believe his satraps would kill him [17]. It might be his chance to survive if he accepted this suggestion and have another fight with Alexander.

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