

Darius III's Death: Alexander's Great Misunderstanding*

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to examine the figure of Archelaos I and developments in Macedon during his reign and the 5th century as a whole. Literary accounts point to what might have been an attempt to improve the administration and organization of the kingdom. A careful analysis of the sources is essential to understand the role played by Archelaos I, together with the position that Macedon occupied in the Greek world, in a series of developments during those years which offered the kingdom the opportunity to increase its power.

KEYWORDS Darius III's Death, Choaspes, Alexander the Great, Achaemenid rites of Succession.

The episode of the death of Darius III deserves a prominent place in the stories of Alexander the Great. As scholarship has strongly remarked, the care of Darius' corpse, the prosecution and execution of his murderers allows Alexander both to claim himself as heir of the last legitimate Great King, Darius III, and also as the kind conqueror who shows the main respect to his antagonistic enemy¹. But the accounts of Darius' death and the later treatment of his corpse by Alexander deserves, to our judge, a closer look and some revisions and reflections.

Our sources tells not much about what happened with Darius, the traitors that killed him, or how Alexander took care of the Great King's dead body. The earliest extant source, Diodorus tells us that during the flight to Bactria, Darius was "seized and murdered" by Bessus. Alexander, who "rode up in hot pursuit", found him dead, and later he gave him a royal funeral. Diodorus also mentions that, in a different version of the events², some other authors explain Alexander found Darius still alive, and he urged Alexander to avenge his death³. Plutarch records a very close version to that of Diodorus⁴.

* I am in doubt here mainly with the precedent works by Pierre Briant. Likewise, I want to thanks Antonio Ignacio Molina Marín and Mario Agudo Villanueva for their help during the writing of this paper and their unvaluable comments on the first draft. Marc Mendoza also read and comment with helpful views and criticism. Joseph Roisman gently help me to be more precise on some ideas. I am in debt with them all, but any fault is completely mine.

¹ Bosworth 1981, 338-345-346 does not address precisely the topics we focus on here. The most shocking silence, however, is that of Briant 2003 (cf. 388-394), who does not link the events in our sources to his own research (Briant 1991; 1994; it also happens in Briant 2002). However, the present research is clearly in debt with Briant's work, and we try to follow here the steps of the clues he already noted in his brilliant papers.

² See Bosworth 1981, 345.

³ D.S. 17.73.2-4. Cf. Prandi 2013, 119-120.

⁴ Plu. *Alex.* 42.3-43.3.

The order of the information in the account of Plutarch is quite interesting. First, the story of the pursuit of Darius is completed with the episode of the thirsty soldiers and the refusal of Alexander to drink. We will get back to this later. Then, Plutarch describes the arrival of Alexander and some of his soldiers to the enemy camp, where they found gold and silver thrown away⁵, wagons of women and children but no drivers, and, after those, Darius' own wagon. Plutarch accepts the version Diodorus seemed to reject. According to Plutarch, a Macedonian soldier, Polystratus, attend the king in his ill-fated hour⁶. Darius asked to drink, and Polystratus gave him some cold water. Then, in a very rhetorical speech (for a dying man), Darius shows his good will towards Alexander because of the way his family had been treated by the Macedonians, and he dies. Then, Alexander arrived there and covered the corpse of the dead Great King with his own cloak. Plutarch also stresses the role of Alexander as the avenger of Darius, with the later torment of the murderer Bessus. Finally, Darius' dead body was laid out by Alexander in royal state to his mother, who was then at ???.

Arrian's account of Alexander's pursuit and Darius' death is rich in details⁷. Beyond the usual tone of Arrian and his attention to details of army logistics, the account stresses most of the topics we already know for the episode of Darius' death: Alexander's fast chase to find Darius, the role of the traitors, and the imprisonment of Darius in a wagon. It is quite interesting to acknowledge the connection between the episode of the lack of water and the thirst of Alexander's soldiers in Plutarch (*Alex.* 42.4-6), and the people's advice in Arrian concerning the lack of water in the region by those who guide Alexander (???). Besides the description of the cold facts, Arrians also adds a kind of portrait of the dead king Darius, clearly hostile in fact, quite close to a summary judgement by the historian⁸.

If we focus now on the Latin sources, Justin's *Epitome* of Pompeius Trogus contains the same details already noted in the tradition⁹. Justin seems to share with Arrian the same aim for stressing that the best that happened to Darius as king was, in fact, to be defeated by the great and honourable man and king who was Alexander. The parallels between the judging epilogue to Darius' death by Arrian, as we have seen, and Justin's pray of a dying Darius (for being grateful to Alexander) are highly remarkable. Of course, the rest of the details are common to the tradition, although the reader can feel here that the encounter of Polystratus and Darius is the fruit of fortune, one more lucky strike for Alexander¹⁰. Also, the presence of a prisoner can help the reader to believe the scene of a Macedonian, Polystratus, talking with the dying Persian king¹¹. However,

⁵ Briant 2003, 394 argues that the silver mentioned here by the sources were, in fact, the silver vessels that the Great King used to transport the water of the river Choaspes for his unique consumption.

⁶ See Briant 2003, 388-394.

⁷ Arr. An. 3.22???. Cf. Bosworth 1980, 339-346. Milns "Alexander's Pursuit of Darius through Iran" authoritatively refuses the validity of Arrian's description of Alexander and his army's march rates in the pursuit of Darius, against the uncritical opinion of Tarn and Hammond.

⁸ And his conclusion is also helpful to this research: "[Darius] then, a homeless fugitive in the land he once ruled, ruthlessly betrayed by his own guards, a monarch in chains contemptuously struggled away from the scene of his former glory, he was finally murdered by the treachery of those most bound in duty to serve him. Such was the unhappy life of Darius; dead, he was more fortunate; for he was buried in the royal tomb, his children were given by Alexander the same upbringing and education they would have had if he had still been king - and his daughter became Alexander's wife. He was about fifty when he died" (Arr. An. 3.23.???).

⁹ Just. 11.15.

¹⁰ Landucci Commentario a 71.1-2...

¹¹ Although we can possibly argue that the Persian King could speak fluent Greek, we can doubt he spoke Greek while dying.

there are other interesting elements in Justin's account, especially the fact that Darius' wagon was a 'covered vehicle', where he was conveyed by night.

Likewise, all these accounts are somehow very brief and lightly related, with not many details about the way Darius was betrayed and how his murderers manage the killing. Fortunately, we count on Curtius' narrative, which is by far the longest and richest account we can read for this episode. Despite the long rhetorical elements at play, the richness of details provided by Curtius' long account is overwhelming; even more, if we have to compare it with the rest of the information preserved by the other sources. Curtius shows here a deep knowledge of both some facts the rest of the extant historians on Alexander dismissed or simply ignored, and also about the Achaemenid culture and traditions¹². The mention of Melon, the Greek interpreter of Darius who could have been also the prisoner who translated the words of the dying Darius to Polystratus in the rest of the sources¹³, or the statement that the initial aim of the traitors of Darius was in fact to look for Alexander's favour, are elements that enrich our perception of such a major moment in the whole history of Alexander's conquest of Asia and the end of the Achaemenid Empire. Also, we can observe our own conclusions through the narrative of Curtius, like with all those who are said to desert from the traitors' side and go to meet Alexander (Bagistanes, Orsilos, Mithracenes, Brochubelus¹⁴...), while what is really happening is that they fled from the Persian camp because they probably heard about the close advance of the Macedonian army, and not because they were refusing the regicide. If we believe Curtius, in fact, all these events happened before Darius was finally killed. However, the main aim of this research is just to focus now on the facts around the supposed conspiracy and treason against Darius and the interpretation of the events until his death.

In one of his brilliant papers, Pierre Briant lists the elements we know about the funerary protocols and arrangements in Achaemenid Persia when a Great King died¹⁵. Despite the scarce knowledge we have on this matter, we can observe a period of public grief¹⁶, related also with a ritual extinction of the fire (which later will reappear)¹⁷. Everyone, then, dressed in mourning clothes, and some people even shaved their hair. All these gestures tried to stress the period of grief as a time of suspended life. Then, there was an assembly, and the result of it would be the beginning of a period of *anomia* (for five days?), which could even result in tumults and strife symbolically displaying the effects of the death of the king (and consequently, the lack of power and order)¹⁸. Then, the successor or heir¹⁹ of the king would drive the remains of the dead king to the royal tombs. To carry out this duty, the corpse and some possessions of the dead king were loaded in a chariot or a wagon. However, there was also a kind of silence and the death of the king is somehow, in a ritual way, kept in secret, like in the case of

¹² Like he also seems to show at Curt. 4.6.5-6.

¹³ Although Curtius 5.11.4 says Darius "had some knowledge of Greek". However, in the same episode, Curtius also adds that "Darius' conversation with the Greeks was being kept from the interpreters", so these interpreters used to be in presence of the Great King. To sum up, we can hardly say if the knowledge of notions of Greek language was characteristic of every Persian king or just a personal skill of Darius III himself.

¹⁴ According to Curt. 5.13.11, he was the son of Mazaeus. **Scholarship used to refuse this information, as far as...**

¹⁵ Briant 1991.

¹⁶ Briant 1991, 1-2.

¹⁷ Briant 1991, 2-3.

¹⁸ Briant 1991, 3-4.

¹⁹ Briant 1991, 5: "l'héritier, c'est le successeur au *sacra*, au *nomizoména*; le roi défunt se continue à travers son successeur qui conduit les cérémonies funèbres".

Ochus who kept the death of Artaxerxes in secret while he managed to rule in the death king's name (up to ten months!)²⁰. This process of succession in Achaemenid Persia is interesting as far as it allows us to try to understand the mechanics of the transition of power, and even the conceptual essence of Achaemenid royal power itself. Nevertheless, the new king could not legally rule until he was recognized (and maybe even proclaimed) by an assembly of the Persians.

If we re-read carefully Curtius' account, we find some references that, albeit vague and obscure, may be related to what Briant describes in his brief paper. Actually, the narrative of Curtius for the days around Darius' arrest and death begins with a Persian assembly (Curt. 5.9.1), and the proposal to Darius by Nabarzanes to be temporarily substituted as the king²¹, a procedure already described by Briant. Curtius also mentions secret meetings (Curt. 5.9.11), and then the Persian camp "was under no one's command, feelings were divided, and they no longer met as before to consult the common interest" (5.9.14), and "in the meantime Artabazus fulfilled all the functions of a commander, constantly visiting the Persian's tents..." (5.9.17) in an episode of what we can clearly consider a lack of command (although Darius was still alive). This period of absence of power is also stressed in the description of the Persian camp: "His [Darius] money and his furniture were looted, as though the act was sanctioned by the conventions of war, and the conspirators²² made off in flight, laden with the spoils they had acquired by this final piece of villainy" (5.12.17). However, while these all happened, Darius was still alive, and Curtius tries to explain this fact by saying that "misinterpreting the lamentations, their soldiers had brought a report to Bessus and Nabarzanes that the king had died by his own hand" (5.12.14). It is hard to say how many days Darius is out of vision of his army, but clearly, we face an act of *anomia*, and a lot of expressions of a ritual procedure.

In the whole episode, I wonder what role Artabazus played, and I consider him a kind of priest or ritual chief. Actually, although there is no clear mention in Curtius of the fire to be put out, there is a sentence that can recall this fact: when Artabazus is mourning for what seems a deadly destiny for his king, he "embrace [Darius] as if he were to see him no more and, bathed in their mutual tears, he ordered him to be taken away by force as he still clung to the king. Then, covering his head so as not to witness the grief of Artabazus, who left as though from a *funeral pyre*...". Even the covered head can remember us of Briant's statement concerning the public and private showings of grief, like the head's shaving. Also, after these facts, the Persians started to tear their clothes "and wailing lugubriously in the barbarian manner" (5.12.12). Curtius' words also recall the rituals explained by Briant, with a constant remembrance of the isolation of Darius in his tent²³. Finally, we hear of Darius being driven in a wagon, covered with dirty skins (5.12.20), one more element of the Achaemenid features of a royal funeral process.

Indeed, Curtius says, at some point, that "Bessus and Nabarzanes and the Bactrian soldiers appeared at the entrance to the king's tent just before dawn masking their secret treachery with the guise of solemn duty". The hour of the day, i.e. "just before dawn", and the reference both to masking (that might somehow mean in the original source a

²⁰ Briant 1991, 5-6.

²¹ Curt. 5.9.4: "Temporarily transfer your authority and your command to another who can carry the title of king only until the enemy quits Asia and who can then, victorious, return your kingdom to you"; 5.9.8: "let us appoint Bessus, the satrap of the area, as temporary king, and when the issue is settled he will return to you, the legitimate king, the command he has held in trust".

²² This is a clear clue that the looting mentioned is not referred to Alexander's.

²³ For example, Curt. 5.12.9 (solitude) and 10 (isolation)

kind of grief costume, like the covered head we already hear of Artabazus) and the “solemn duty” drive us again to the field of ritual features.

The rich narrative of Curtius allows also a careful reader to find clues about the aims of those who scholarship usually considers as the traitors and usurpers who took part in the plot to put Darius to death. In fact, we can already read this plan in Nabarzanes' words, when put forward to substitute Darius in order to regain the realm from the Macedonian invaders (as we already quote it, *supra*). But also, there is a great consciousness of the main role of keeping the Great King safe from being captured by the enemy. In fact, Curtius puts this idea in the mouth of the Macedonians: “In his person [i.e., Darius] lies our victory, and speed will reward us with this great prize” (5.13.4). Despite the usual explanation by the scholarship of Bessus and Nabarzanes' behaviour as simple traitors who greedily desired to become themselves kings instead of Darius, some sentences in Curtius allows at least the shadow of a doubt. Actually, when Patron, the mercenary Greek commander, informed Darius of his perception and fears of a possible conjure against the king, “Darius, however, was not in the least alarmed”. This first clue for what can have been a great misinterpretation of the events by the Greek (and Roman) audience and beyond, is again stressed by the following passage:

“[15] Bessus and his fellow-conspirators came to Darius' wagon and started urging him to mount a horse and flee to escape his enemy. [16] Darius, however, declared that the gods had come to avenge him and, calling for Alexander's protection, refused to go along with the traitors. At this they were furious. They hurled their spears at the king and left him there, run through many times. [17] They also maimed his animals to prevent them advancing any further, and killed the two slaves accompanying the king. [18] After this crime, to scatter the traces of their flight. Nabarzanes made for Hyrcania and Bessus, with a small retinue of cavalry, for Bactra (...)

[20] None of the captives was able to identify Darius' cart and, though the wagons were individually searched as the Macedonians overtook them, there was no indication of where the king had fled. (...) [23] Meanwhile, since they lacked a driver, the animals pulling Darius had left the main road and after wandering around for four stades had come to a stop in a certain valley, exhausted as much by the heat as by their wounds. [24] There was a spring close by. This had been pointed out to the Macedonian Polystratus by people who knew the area, and he now came to it because he was tormented with thirst. While he drank the water from his helmet, he caught sight of the spears stuck in the bodies of the dying animals [25] and, surprised at their being wounded rather than driven off... [was shocked by the cries] of a man only half alive”. (Curt. 5.13.15-20).

Why urge Darius to fly if the conspirers had managed to betray the king? Were they as conscious as the Macedonians (as is clearly shown in 5.13.4) that the Persian king should be kept alive in order to still resist the invaders? However, they finally killed him, but just after Darius (in the version given by Curtius) had bestowed Alexander as his protector. Had, thus, Darius betrayed the Persian throne? Many questions, indeed, and we must keep in mind that the text of Curtius (as the rest of our sources) is produced for a concrete audience, who already knew the story and how it happened in general terms²⁴. But the behaviour of Bessus and Nabarzanes is quite surprising: they did not desert²⁵, like many others. Our sources, however, say they want to deliver Darius to

²⁴ And this fact helps to interpret some parts of Curtius' account, like the explanations of 5.9.6-7.

²⁵ Curt. 5.11.11: “He [Darius] preferred to endure among his men anything that fortune brought him rather than to become a deserter, he said, and if his soldiers did not wish him to be saved, his death was

Alexander in order to gain the favour of the Macedonians²⁶. On the contrary, and far from what we expect, they manage to carry out the funeral rites we already noticed concerning the usual Achaemenid features of succession and funeral for a king (and in this case, they began when the last king was still alive). Bessus might have probably been in charge of conducting at some point these preparations and arrangements, and Briant also stated that there was the responsibility of the successor to manage these details. So, might have been Bessus just following the usual patterns in the present circumstances? Are we in front of some rituals of Achaemenid succession that the sources (and scholarship) misinterpreted through centuries? A large possibility to think about.

Thirst and Water Springs

Although the sources, except for Curtius, avoid including the details of Darius' arrest and death in their accounts, all the authors mention at some point the presence of a spring and the water Darius took before he died. Leaving Polystratus aside, the inclusion of this element is quite strange, even more, due to the consensus of the sources to include it. In order to offer a possible interpretation, the narrative of Plutarch is here of the main importance.

In the order he presents his episodes, Plutarch explains first the story of the thirst of the Macedonian soldiers with Alexander, and how he, despite the lack of water, refused the ration some people had offered him. For Plutarch's aim and method, as a biographer, the episode is, in fact, a new chance for him to stress the goodness and kindness of Alexander's character. Actually, the stories found in Plutarch's chapter 42 of his *Life of Alexander* (where the lack of water and thirsty soldiers is included) are related to the precedent chapters and belong to the motif of Alexander's relationship with excess and his self-control. So, we can simply consider the case of the refusal to drink water by Alexander in order to avoid his thirsty soldiers to "be out of heart" (quoting Plutarch *verbatim*). However, we can also consider the aim of establishing an opposition between Alexander's self-control and his greatness as a ruler, which result in deep respect from his men, with Darius' end, being betrayed by his own people. But we can even go further, and think about Darius and his thirst, which is attended by Polystratus. Quite a surprise, indeed, to read of a Persian king drinking water from a common spring, if we bear in mind that the Achaemenid kings, in the words of Herodotus, did not drink water any other than the one from the Choaspes River²⁷. Of course, this feature should be considered as a ritual custom²⁸, and more in the case of a dying Darius. However, there is a clear connection between Alexander's refusal to drink water and Darius' thirst. In my opinion, this is also a hint at Alexander's legitimacy, and his position as the legal heir of Darius against the other Persian pretenders (i.e. Bessus, mainly). We also hear of Alexander visiting the Choaspes River, where he probably drank the water²⁹. So, if Alexander had already tasted the water of Achaemenid legitimacy from the Choaspes, he of course could not drink any other water but that, in quality of the

coming too late". This words can perfectly fit with Bessus and Nabarzanes' behavior as showed in Curtius' account of the facts.

²⁶ Curt. 5.10-5 and 12.1.

²⁷ Hdt. 1.188. Béquignon 1940; Briant 1994; 2002, 263-264.

²⁸ On the relationship between the Achaemenids and the waters see Béquignon 1940; Briquel 1981; Briant 1994.

²⁹ Curt. 5.2.9.

new Great King. As a consequence, a dying Darius, already stripped of his royal power, needs to drink and the source of this water is no more a matter of royalty or legitimacy³⁰.

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³⁰ However, again we must be cautious with our interpretations. Maybe this can be a Macedonian version of the facts, but the fact that Darius was dying near a water spring can also be related with the Achaemenid funerary rituals: Briant 1991, 7 argues that sometimes the funerary rites and the trespassing of royal power from the death (or dying) Persian king to his successor took place in the temple of Anahita, "à la fois déesse des eaux, de la fertilité mais aussi déesse guerrière).