The Policy of Darius towards Thrace and Macedonia (514–512)

In the 540s in the Aegean region a new power appeared: Persia. Persia was, for a couple of decades, to play a major political and economic role in the area of Propontis, Hellespont, and the north Aegean coast. Persian policy led to the subjugation of part of southern Thrace and the Greek cities situated between Byzantium and the Strymon River, as well as to the subordination of Macedonia. The appearance of the Persians on the west coast of Asia Minor is dated ca. 546, when the Persian king Cyrus succeeded in destroying the Lydian kingdom and annexing its territory to Persia. Pressed by circumstances, the coastal Greek cities agreed to submit to Cyrus, on condition that they would maintain the status they had held under the rule of Croesus. Their proposal was rejected and only Miletus was allowed to sign an oath contract, making the city the first Persian ally in the region. All the rest were conquered by the imperial vicar Harpagus—an act which resulted in the bloodless conquest of the nearby islands. The dependent position of the aforementioned Greek cities in the region is later confirmed by the participation of their contingents in the Persian army during Cambyses’ march against Egypt (525).

Further Persian actions are connected with the conquest of Samos, usually dated to 516. The importance of the enterprise can be judged by the fact that the operation was under the command of the high-standing Otanes, who was one of the seven Persians. The seizure of the city was accompanied

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1 Hdt.i.75.1–80.6; 84.1–5.
2 Ibid. i.141.1–4.
3 Ibid. i.162.1–163.1; 164.1–3; 168.1–169.2.
4 Ibid. ii.1.2; iii.1.1.
5 Ibid. iii.139.1–149.1.
6 Ibid. iii.141.1. In Herodotus’ view (III.67.1–79.3) the seven Persians, among whom was the future Great King Darius, were Persians of noble blood who, through conspiracy, dethroned the usurper Smerdis. His information is proved by the Behistun Inscription (DB IV.80–86; Kent 1950: 130, 132; Schmitt 1991: 72–73), where Darius mentions six of his adherents who helped him carry out the enterprise. In the inscription, the usurper is under the name of Gaumata. For the possibility that Darius was the real usurper against the authority of the legal heir to the throne Bardiya, see Briant 2002: 97–109; Kuhrt 2007: 136–138.
by a massacre, and people from the continent were brought to compensate for the depopulation that followed. The Samian Syloson, who according to Herodotus was one of Darius’ benefactors, was appointed governor of the island. In fact, the story itself illustrates the way Darius intended to organize the Persian government over those territories—through personal dependency of local tyrants on him.

The Aims of Darius’ Scythian Campaign

The conquest of western Asia Minor and some islands in the Aegean Sea provided the Persians with the chance not only to control trade in the region but also, if necessary, to use military force against the neighbouring Greeks and Thracians. And indeed the Persian invasion in Europe was not long in coming. However, the main target of the Persian attack proved not, as may be expected, to be the Greeks and Thracians but rather the Pontic Scythians occupying the lands north at the Istros delta and having no common boundary with Persia.

What could the reason for the purposeful attack against the Scythians be? Three different versions are presented by the ancient authors. In Herodotus’ view, the motive for the march against the Scythians stems from Darius’ strong wish to take revenge for their invasion of Media directed against the Medes who, at the time, had power over it. Ctesias, on the other hand, claims that after Ariaramnes’ sea campaign Darius and the Scythian king Scytharbes exchanged offensive letters, which became the reason for the Great King, leading a huge army, to invade Scythia. Justin offers a third version, according to which the unwillingness of the Scythian king to give Darius his daughter in marriage led to a war between Persia and the Scythians.

It is clear that the information ancient authors give does not provide a satisfactory explanation of the campaign against the Scythians. Scholars accordingly give different interpretations. Some suppose that the purpose of the Scythian expedition was purely economic (i.e., that Darius undertook that enterprise in search of Scythian gold). Others think that the intention of the

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7 Hdt. iv.1.1–2.
8 FGrH 688 F 13.20.
9 Just. ii.5.8–9.
10 Bury 1897: 281–282 believes that Darius’ main purpose was the gold mines of the Agathyrsi, whose settlements he locates in Transylvania. See also Balcer 1972: 131–132, who thinks that the purpose of the Scythian march was not the conquest of Thrace and Scythia but to acquire the means needed for the suppression of the Egyptian Revolt and the