CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DARIUS III (336-331 B.C.)

Arses and the Corinthian League

The murdered Artaxerxes III was succeeded by Arses, his son by his Queen of queens, Atossa (whose name, piously Zoroastrian, had recurred among Achaemenian princesses since the time of Cyrus). Egypt revolted at the news of his father’s death; and in the same year the Greek states founded the Corinthian League with Philip of Macedon as its ‘protector’, and proclaimed war on Persia. The ostensible cause was to avenge the destruction of Greek shrines by Xerxes almost one hundred and fifty years earlier—a good rallying ground for the deeply divided Hellenes. A Macedonian army crossed at once into Asia Minor, and was welcomed there by some of the Greek cities.

The accessions of Darius III and Alexander

Before Arses could act on either front, he tried to rid himself of the dominating Bagoas, only to be poisoned by him like his father. Bagoas is said to have had all Arses’ children put to death; and there seems to have been a general slaughter of other princes of the blood over the years, for the king-making eunuch (who as commander-in-chief evidently had the loyalty of Persian troops) now set on the throne Darius III, a great-great-nephew of Artaxerxes II. Darius was then a man of forty-five, with some experience of rule as satrap of Armenia; but he can have had no training for governing the empire, and no expectation of the crown. He early proved to be of some mettle, however, for when Bagoas, finding him intractable, tried to poison him in his turn, he is said to have forced the eunuch to swallow the deadly drink himself.¹

A few months later Philip of Macedon was murdered, and his son Alexander, then just twenty, succeeded him, though not without a struggle. He recalled the Macedonian army (which had already suffered a defeat) from Asia Minor, and harshly quelled the unrest which had broken out among his Greek ‘allies’. The first city to revolt from Macedonian domination, Thebes, was stormed by his troops, its houses razed, and its surviving inhabitants all sold into slavery. This has been judged

¹ For references see Olmstead, Persian Empire, 490 n. 19.
to be ‘a piece of brutal power-politics. Alexander, impatient to begin war on Persia, meant to break the spirit of resistance in Hellas to protect his master plan’. Such an act, committed by Hellenes against Hellenes, augured ill for the ‘barbarian’ peoples of Asia, against whom the young king meant to lead his forces in a campaign which had two acknowledged goals—vengeance and the acquisition of wealth.

*Alexander's early campaigns*

In 334, when Darius III had just succeeded in subduing Egypt yet again, Alexander launched for a second time an attack on Asia Minor, nominally as an undertaking of the Corinthian League. The Persian rulers of the western satrapies met him with their combined forces at Granicus, and after a hard-fought battle suffered disastrous defeat. ‘The long list of the Persian dead—the generals Niphates and Petines, the satraps Spithridates and Mithrobarzanes, the nobles Arbupales, Mithridates, and Pharnaces (the son, son-in-law, and brother-in-law of Darius, respectively), and Omares, leader of the native mercenaries—showed how Persians could yet sacrifice themselves for their king’. By this signal victory the Greeks, who had provided much-sought-after mercenaries throughout the Near East for generations, enhanced their already formidable reputation as fighters; and this became an additional weapon in the arsenal so skilfully disposed of by Alexander.

*The battle of Issus*

After the battle Alexander installed a Macedonian officer as satrap of Hellespontine Phrygia, a sign that he meant to remain and rule in Asia Minor, as successor to the Great King. In the following months he made himself master of much of that land; and late the following year he crossed the Taurus, and entered the North Syrian plain. There at last Darius met him at Issus, with a huge army gathered from the eastern and western lands of the empire. Curtius Rufus, who in the mid first century A.C. compiled a ‘History of Alexander’ from older sources, describes how the Persian army was led out on that fateful day. Following their usual custom, he says, they did not make a start until the sun

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3 See Olmstead, op. cit., 491-3.
4 Olmstead, op. cit., 497.
5 See Bengtson, op. cit., 308.