Fourth Century Revolts against Persia: The Test Case of Sidon (348–345 BCE)

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In 348/7, the Persian king Artaxerxes III was confronted with a new threat: the Phoenician city-kingdom of Sidon, an essential naval and army rallying point in the West, had raised an insurgency against his rule. Artaxerxes was no stranger to such revolts and had experienced both success and failures on this front: after his accession to the throne 11 years before he had been able to force ambitious provincial governors into line, but had, in 351, himself been humiliated militarily by the Egyptians, who had continued a successful insurgency against the Great King, for which Artaxerxes still sought revenge. Consequently, since we have evidence for other “revolts,” both successful and less so, why is the Sidonian uprising, which lasted little more than two or three years, a good “test case” to understand Persian responses to “insurgency and terror”? Three reasons emerge.

First, there is the content-related reason. The Sidonian Rebellion fits the standard definition of an insurgency: it is a rebellion against a recognized government—Sidon had recognized Artaxerxes II’s and his son Artaxerxes III’s authority as Great King. The Sidonian insurgency also binds together the fourth century histories of the Persian Empire, Egypt and Hellas and so offers a unique window into their interaction and responses to an insurgent movement. Additionally, the sources seem to reflect, at first sight, not only the reasons for the rebellion and the motives of the rebels and their allies, but even the means the Great King used to be successful—i.e., state terror. Although the subject of much debate concerning their accuracy, the literary sources seem to report on the actions of the Iranian authorities before the uprising, the reasons for the failure of the insurgency on the part of the Sidonians, the harsh

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1 See Brice, chapter one, for a discussion of definitions and characteristics of insurgency. All dates BCE unless otherwise indicated.
2 At the very least the sparse evidence suggests that Sidon behaved as a loyal subject, see Briant (2002) 651, 664–5.
form of the Royal crackdown (state terror), and the impact of the uprising on the region in the decades that followed the insurgency's suppression. However, since no scholarly consensus on all these issues has been reached so far, not least with regard to what Persian retaliatory measures looked like and how they are to be explained, the precision offered by applying the terminology of insurgency and terrorism can bring a necessary clarity to Persian policy that literary studies alone have failed to provide.

Second, there is the socio-political reason. For a long time, rebellion against Persia has been designated and characterized as a symptom of the decline of the Persian Empire in the fourth century. Although this interpretation is now generally rejected, few scholars are even interested these days in exploring the relationship between revolt and the nature of (and responses to) Persian rule. But the Sidonian revolt and its suppression does allow us an important opportunity to analyze the connections between the structures and institutions of the Persian Empire, the motives of individuals and groups, and the situational developments of the 340s. Moreover, using the Sidonian Revolt of 348 as a test case allows for the creation of a base of comparison with which we might examine other "insurgencies" against the Great Kings and Achaemenid Royal responses to them. Indeed, once we have conducted a critical study of this (fairly) well-evidenced event, we can begin to ask questions about how singular or typical the Sidonian insurgency was and how its suppression fits within the wider history of the Persian Empire. Understanding Sidon and Artaxerxes' approach to it, allows us to lay the framework for asking "big" questions like, do the quantity of rebellions and the forms of state terror in response really separate Assyrians and Persians, as has been previously assumed, or were they similar?

The third and final reason to study the Sidonian Revolt is a methodological one that in certain ways overlaps with the other two. The main literary source for Persian policy during this period is external to the Empire—Greek—but does not exist in its original form, surviving only second hand, as a source for the universal history of Diodorus Siculus, a first century Roman historian. What does it mean that only a secondary, not contemporary, and at the same time foreign and anti-Persian view of events has been handed down to us, a view that is at the same time not identical with the point of view of the defeated Sidonians? This question has overwhelmingly dominated the conversation (more on this below) and perhaps distracted us from looking closely at events and individuals. Using the focus offered by the insurgency methodology allows us to move beyond these questions and re-center the analysis on the Revolt, its characteristics and the Great King's policy.