The Greek Wars: The Fight for Egypt

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To the Persians in their days of greatness, Babylonia was the core of their realm; and the big three other satrapies were Bactria, Lydia, and Egypt. Hilmar Klinkott comments on their known economic and diplomatic importance. Lydia, in Klinkott’s words, was the “gate to the West”, guaranteeing the political and trade connection to the Aegean. Bactria, in a similar way, was a potter’s wheel which facilitated trade branching out into the territory of the Sogdians and the Sacae, the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs. To gloss the term “trade” in Klinkott’s context, one must avoid being (in Moses Finley’s words) “bemused by the Anglo-Dutch wars”, and bear in mind that “trade competition” equals competition to secure supply of commodities, not competition to gain markets. That supply, at a symbolic level, is the flow of tribute to the king, as illustrated in the Persepolis reliefs—while, at a more prosaic level, it is most importantly the supply of armed forces for the king’s campaigns.

This chapter’s name is adapted from the title of George Cawkwell’s Greek Wars: The Failure of Persia. The implication here that there ought to be reservations about “the failure of Persia” is intentional, and a current of sympathy with the “new Achaemenid history” will be detected in this chapter as a whole. What will be expounded, therefore, is the idea that a vital focus of the whole fourth century, from Cunaxa to Ipsus, was “the fight for Egypt”—for “Eldorado on the Nile” (as Naphtali Lewis called it), and that by emerging as the last winner of that fight, Ptolemy son of Lagus inaugurated in Egypt what J.G. Manning (drawing on Willy Clarysse) calls the “Greek millennium”.

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1 Hdt. 3.89–97.
2 Klinkott, Der Satrap, 58.
3 Finley, Ancient Economy, 158.
4 An idea discussed and evaluated by McCaskie, “As on a darkling plain”, especially at 152–173.
5 Lewis, Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt, 8–36.
6 Manning, Last Pharaohs, 27–28; Manning makes it a “long millennium”, viewing the Ptolemaic reformation as “the consummation ... of a long process of understanding and accommodation between two cultures that had been in direct and sustained contact with each other since the seventh century BC.”
In the Persian imperial context, the importance of Bactria and Lydia, respectively, is clear: Bactria was governed by highly placed satraps including Masis- 
tes,7 and in the last Achaemenid days by Bessus,8 who attempted to take over as king after Darius III. Pierre Briant argues, from the appointment of Bardiya, younger son of Cyrus, to Bactria, that the Achaemenid kings attached great importance to the satrapy.9 Its continuing importance under Alexander is evident, because it was the home of his wife Roxane, daughter of Oxyartes.

Lydia, destination of the royal road, had a special role in the empire, one which is implied by the four Lydian gold Croeseid coins found under each of the two foundation deposits at Persepolis. Soon after, gold coins showing the king as an archer were to be minted at Sardis—but coin production apparently remained from the royal viewpoint a contribution which Lydia was uniquely qualified to make. Then, in 408, Darius II sent Cyrus the Younger, his second son, to a western Asian command centred in Lydia—a power-base which seven years later was to give Cyrus a decent chance of overthrowing his elder brother Artaxerxes II.

Cyrus’ revolt was a pivotal moment in the life of the Achaemenid empire, not for what it accomplished (since Cyrus failed to overthrow Artaxerxes, and was killed in the attempt), but for what it distracted Artaxerxes from—in Egypt, the third of the big three satrapies. About the time of Darius II’s death, Egypt had revolted from Persian control. This was not unusual: every, or almost every, accession to the throne was accompanied by a power-struggle.10 Pharaoh Amyrtaeus’ reign and the time of the Twenty-eighth Dynasty are dated from 404,11 but Amyrtaeus’ control of Egypt was partial at first: Egyptians fought for

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7 Hdt. 9.107 and 113. Possibly Masisites’ name reflects Old Persian mathišta (“the Greatest”), a word used by Xerxes in XPf, the Harem Inscription from Persepolis, where Xerxes says: “Darius had other sons, but—thus was Ahuramazda’s desire—my father Darius made me the greatest [mathišta] after himself. When my father Darius went away from the throne, by the grace of Ahuramazda I became king on my father’s throne” (XPf lines 28–35; cf. Briant,

8 Arrian Anabasis 3.8.3 and 21.1.

9 Briant, Cyrus to Alexander, 78.

10 George Cawkwell, Greek Wars, 162, explains the revolt as “presumably part of the usual accession troubles of a new king”. On the power-struggle at the beginning of Darius II’s reign, see Lewis, Sparta and Persia, 70–76.

11 Darius’ nineteen years as king of Egypt commenced in 424/3, and Amyrtaeus’ six in 405/4, according to Eusebius (Chronicle, Schoene-Petermann edition, p. 149).