

## J. A. BARSBY ESSAY

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### CYRUS THE GREAT: WAS HE A THREAT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF GREECE?

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Cyrus' overthrow of Croesus' Lydian kingdom in 547 BC brought the eastern Persians into contact with Greeks for the first time. It can be said that all Greeks, free or subjected, felt the effect of the Persian empire. Future Greek international relations, politics and economics would be massively influenced by Persians and attitudes toward them.<sup>1</sup> The official policy of Sparta is depicted by Herodotus throughout his narrative as anti-Persian. Eastern powers such as Lydia and Egypt had long depended on Greek hoplite mercenaries probably recruited from religious centers such as Delphi and Branchidae.<sup>2</sup> Yet the increasing threat of Cyrus and his Persians led both of these kingdoms to seek to establish more formal links with Sparta, which at this time had the pre-eminent army in Greece (*Hdt.* 1.65-68).<sup>3</sup> Gifts exchanged between Sparta and Lydia symbolised this new alliance (1.69).<sup>4</sup> It is quite possible that Sparta had no idea of the implications of these actions. Indeed, Dandamaev believes that when this original alliance was made, Sparta in all likelihood had not even heard of Persia except

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<sup>1</sup> A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago 1948) 41.

<sup>2</sup> O. Murray, 'The Ionian Revolt', in J. Boardman *et al.* (edd.), *The Cambridge Ancient History* 4 (Cambridge 1982) 464.

<sup>3</sup> Croesus had been told by the oracles to 'find out which was the most powerful Greek state and ally himself with it' (R. Waterfield [tr.], *Herodotus, The Histories* [Oxford 1998] 23). After looking into the societies he chose Sparta for this role (*Hdt.* 1.53).

<sup>4</sup> Evidence also suggests ties between Sparta and Scythian lords, a possible reaction to Darius' move into Europe in 513 BC and the desire by the Spartans to unite the enemies of Persia.

from the ambassadors themselves.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the case, Sparta was now firmly set in its foreign policy and was part of the old grand alliance against Persia, which also included Egypt, Babylon and Lydia. Yet until Xerxes' invasion in 480, Sparta was not involved in Persian matters at all. When Croesus marched into Cappadocia, for example, which at this time was part of Cyrus' territory, he did not take his allies with him, with the possible exception of some Egyptian Greek mercenaries. Herodotus tells us the main reasons for the invasion: Croesus' desire for land, his belief that the oracle was favorable, and his wish to punish Cyrus over Astyages. But he does not state why Croesus did not invite his allies to join him (cf. 1.73). Perhaps the king thought that if he were to launch a solo campaign he would not have to share the conquered land; yet it is unlikely that he would have rejected sizable assistance if it had been offered. It is more likely that Sparta had other reasons for not going.

Argos had always been a major factor in Spartan decision-making and Herodotus implies that Argos and the ongoing domestic wars between the two states is the reason why they did not go (*Hdt.* 1.82).<sup>6</sup> The other major Spartan domestic concern was always the fact that the helots could rebel if given the chance.<sup>7</sup> H. W. Parke suggests another possible factor. He points out that Herodotus mentions a gold lion statue, dedicated by Croesus to Apollo at Delphi, which fell over and was partly melted when the temple burned down (*Hdt.* 1.50). Parke notes that this must have looked like a bad omen to the pious Greeks, especially the Spartans, who often would not fight at the time of their religious festivals.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Lion seems to have been a Lydian icon, as shown on Lydian coins from Croesus' reign.<sup>9</sup> We can assume that such events did affect the Spartans but, as Herodotus implies, domestic matters were probably of chief importance. Whatever the reason the allies were not present, Croesus did not defeat Cyrus and attributed this to his lack of troops (*Hdt.* 1.77). Croesus returned to Sardis, made plans to fight again in the spring, and sent word to his allies to assemble in four months (*Hdt.* 1.77). We do not hear the Spartan response to the first message, but we are told that when Croesus sent a second message to his

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<sup>5</sup> M. A. Dandamaev (tr. W. J. Vogelsang), *A Political History of the Achaemenid Empire* (Leiden 1989) 23.

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus says that the Spartans were engaged with Argos when the second message arrived asking them to come and that they had just defeated Argos at Thyreae (1.82). We can assume then that these events were occupying them when Croesus marched on Cyrus.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note here that Thucydides (1.118) says that Sparta had often been prevented from taking international action because of wars in their own territory, which we can assume included both Argos campaigns and helot risings.

<sup>8</sup> H. W. Parke, 'Croesus and Delphi', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 25 (1984) 216. This was the reason that Sparta could not march immediately to meet Darius' threat at Marathon in 490 BC (*Hdt.* 6.106), and also why the Spartans did not march to meet Mardonius in Boeotia when to them 'nothing was more important than catering to the god's requirements' (*Hdt.* 9.7).

<sup>9</sup> J. M. Cook, *The Greeks in Ionia and the East* (London 1962) 95 fig. 29.

allies to come immediately and remove the siege, Sparta began making preparations to provide help. Herodotus says this decision was taken despite the domestic problems with Argos (it was just after the battle of Thyreae), but that half way through preparations when their ships were ready another message came with the news that Sardis had fallen. Sparta, with 'deep regret', called off its preparations (*Hdt.* 1.83).<sup>10</sup> Parke suggests that this version of events may have been circulated by the Spartans soon after the fact in order to uphold their international reputation, for Herodotus implies that Sparta were in fact unable to aid Croesus on the first offensive due to their border dispute with Argos.<sup>11</sup>

The next event involving Spartans and Persians had virtually the same result. According to Herodotus, the Ionians sent ambassadors to Sparta asking for aid against Persia (1.152). The Spartans refused to help without explanation. It is possible that Sparta simply did not wish to fight for those with whom she previously had not made alliances, but it is more like that it just did not want to send its limited troops away from Greece. There were few Spartites and these were needed in Spartan territory to keep Argos out and more importantly to keep the helots from rebelling. This interpretation is supported by the story of the Spartan ambassador who instructed Cyrus to keep away from the Ionian Greeks. This incident shows that Sparta saw herself as protector of Greeks and just how far into this 'fantasy' she had entered.<sup>12</sup> Sparta believed that its reputation as the 'warrior race' was enough for threats alone to intimidate the Persians.<sup>13</sup>

It does seem, however, that Sparta was prepared to involve itself against Persian supported states if the situation was right. This is evident from Sparta's failed campaign against Polycrates of Samos (*Hdt.* 3.44-56). This campaign was launched because Samian 'dissenters' had rebelled and sailed to Sparta seeking aid, obviously regarding Sparta as their protector. The Samians said they went to Sparta because Samos had aided Sparta against Messana, but it is more likely that they were aware of Sparta's anti-Persian policies. So why did Sparta attack Samos, a state that was obviously pro-Persian, but keep away from Persia itself? Dandamaev suggests that the answer can be seen in the Ionian revolt, when Sparta again decided not to aid the Ionians. He believes the Spartites simply realised that they could not defeat the Persians in a prolonged campaign deep in Asia: they had seen Lydia, Babylon and Egypt crushed and realised that they were not in a position to mount an attack of that scale.<sup>14</sup> This is quite possible. Indeed Herodotus claims that their main reason for not engaging

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<sup>10</sup> Tr. Waterfield [3] 38.

<sup>11</sup> Parke [8] 228.

<sup>12</sup> Murray [2] 464.

<sup>13</sup> A good example of this Spartan mentality is shown by Thucydides: 'You Spartans are the only people in Hellas who wait calmly on events, relying for your defence not on action but on making people think that you will act' (Thuc. 1.69; tr. R. Warner, *History of the Peloponnesian War* [Harmondsworth 1972]) 75.

<sup>14</sup> Dandamaev [5] 158.

was that they did not want to march inland for the three months required to reach Susa (*Hdt.* 5.54). Yet it seems more likely that the Spartans were not so much afraid of Persia as of the effect that a prolonged campaign would have on domestic affairs. To send their main armies away from Greece for the year or more needed to actually mount a campaign such as this could have weakened their own position within Greece: Argos could invade; some of their allies could defect if things did not go totally to plan overseas; and, worst of all, the helots could revolt and break down the entire social system.

The immediate reaction of the Ionians when Cyrus conquered Croesus was to seek to make terms with him along the same lines as they had previously had with Croesus. After Croesus attacked and subdued the Asian Greeks, they paid him a moderate tribute, although we do not know exactly what this was (*Hdt.* 1.26f.). However, the Greeks did not feel oppressed under Croesus, chiefly because he did not involve himself in the internal affairs of the Greek states. They were free to pursue their own trade and governments. Because of this moderate rule Croesus is often portrayed by ancient authors such as Herodotus as being almost Greek. He was considered to be pious to the Greek gods and a lover of Greek culture. It was exactly this type of arrangement that the Ionians were trying to continue with Cyrus. Cyrus refused, however, because when Croesus had invaded Persian land Cyrus had sent messages to the Ionians hoping to persuade them to rebel against Croesus, but they had refused to listen (*Hdt.* 1.76). He now told them the story of the dancing fish and they knew they would have to fight him. They left Sardis to build their city walls and prepare their forces.<sup>15</sup> By right of conquest, title to former Lydian subjects was passed directly to Cyrus, and to have made what Olmstead rightly sees as an 'insolent demand' on Cyrus to allow them to live on the same terms would have made them rebels in the eyes of the Persians.<sup>16</sup> Diodorus says that the Persian general Harpagos, when he was given the job of subduing the Ionians, told the Greeks that they would now become Cyrus' slaves because in the past they had not wanted to be his allies (*Diod. Sic.* 9.35.3). From this point there was a common cause among the Asian mainland Greeks, except Miletos, against Cyrus. They had to fight because there was no way out for them even though they were willing to be moderate tribute-paying states. Some states decided to flee when it was evident that they could not beat the Persian army. They did this rather than become Persian subjects, something they considered to be a form of slavery. The other states did not flee but submitted to Persian control when beaten (*Hdt.* 1.169).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cyrus did, however, allow Miletos to continue the treaty she had previously held (*Hdt.* 1.141). There are various theories as to why he did so. Olmstead suggests [1] 41 that Miletos may have rebelled against Croesus when asked by Cyrus. This seems unlikely as surely Herodotus would not have left out information like this. It seems more likely that the reason was simply to cause divisions in the Ionian resistance and prevent a united resistance to him; see A. R. Burn, *The Persian Wars* (London 2002) 38.

<sup>16</sup> Olmstead [1] 42.

<sup>17</sup> Phocaea and Teos were the cities whose citizens fled (*Hdt.* 1.162).

In order to assess whether Cyrus and Persia would have been a threat to the prosperity of Greece as a whole, we must look at the example of the Ionians and other Asian Greeks, since this will show us Greeks before and after major Persian influence. Ionians had previously been the wealthiest of the Greeks because their location put them in the perfect area for multiple trade routes. They became the 'middle men' between the east and the west and dominated the trade of both the Aegean and the Black Seas, their influence spreading to Egypt and the west Mediterranean.<sup>18</sup> With the arrival of Persia, however, this dominance stopped and in one generation the economic prosperity was effectively removed.<sup>19</sup> Some scholars have suggested that Persia was not bad but rather good for the Ionian merchants, especially those of Miletos, because it allowed them to trade with the Near East, mainland Greece and the Black Sea coast freely within the empire.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, Dandamaev maintains that the chief reason Ionian trade faltered was because large ports like Athens became more prominent trade centres.<sup>21</sup> However, while it is apparent that Athens did grow more powerful via trade in this period, it is more likely that trade had been previously removed from the Ionians as a result of their loss of independence, whereupon Athens and other similar ports became the new focus of trade. There are many examples of how Asian Greeks were ruined by Persian western expansion. With the growth of the Black Sea trade, Ionic cities had previously been able to rely on imported slaves and grain from areas like the Propontis and Scythia.<sup>22</sup> This state of affairs allowed them to focus more on commodities, specialist industries and production.<sup>23</sup> However, with Persian western movements, such as the Scythian expedition in 513 BC, grain and other essentials became severely limited and the Greeks had to focus some of their attention on providing these for themselves. The Ionians knew they needed these western and northern trade routes if they were to survive, which is why Histiaeus of Miletos attempted to found Myrcinus on the Thracian coast as a Milesian emporium.<sup>24</sup> What speciality items were still made were now also much harder to trade, largely because by the time of Cambyses both the Egyptian and Lydian 'royal markets' had closed.<sup>25</sup> Archaeological findings show, for example, that following the Egyptian conquest in 525 BC there seems to be a twenty-five year gap in the trade of pottery to Egypt.<sup>26</sup> Another valuable source of revenue that was lost with Persian conquest was the Asian

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<sup>18</sup> Murray [2] 477.

<sup>19</sup> Murray [2] 478.

<sup>20</sup> Dandamaev [5] 152.

<sup>21</sup> Dandamaev [5] 157.

<sup>22</sup> Murray [2] 477.

<sup>23</sup> Cook [9] 94.

<sup>24</sup> Murray [2] 477. Of course, Histiaeus being a tyrant it is much more likely he did this for his own benefit rather than that of his people.

<sup>25</sup> Murray [2] 477f.

<sup>26</sup> Murray [2] 477.

Greek mercenary trade. Previously mercenaries, especially those from small Ionian cities, had served in large numbers for Lydia and Egypt. Following the Persian conquest these troops became subjects. One major function of Persian subjects was to serve in the armies. When Cambyses led his forces against Amasis' Egypt in 526 BC, he included some Ionian and Aeolian Greeks in his army (*Hdt.* 3.1). From Cyrus' time, once Ionia was finally conquered, Greek hoplites formed part of the regular Persian armies, since they were the best infantry of the time.

Another loss in prosperity came from tribute. With Croesus, tribute had been most likely in the form of gifts to the king, and this practice probably continued with Cyrus and Cambyses. Darius, however, fixed a set tribute when he came to power in 521 BC as part of his policy to reorganise the satrapies. Herodotus tells us that the Ionians, Asian Magnesians, Aeolians, Carians, Lycians, Milyans and Pamphylians were counted as a single paying unit and paid revenue of four hundred talents of silver (*Hdt.* 3.90). While it is possible that for each city the amount ended up similar to that paid to Croesus or Cyrus, it is likely that this set sum created resentment among the Greeks, since it would have been enforced strongly without exceptions. With this tribute system in place the Greeks were facing an oriental bureaucracy at its strongest.<sup>27</sup> This resentment of Persian control over economics can be seen as one of the major factors causing the Ionians to rebel in 499 BC<sup>28</sup>, a last effort of a merchant people to reclaim their past glory.

The economic systems of the Greeks and Persians were fundamentally different, something that caused major friction between the two peoples. This is shown in Cyrus' speech to the Spartan ambassador after Sparta had warned Cyrus to stay away from the Ionians. Cyrus says he does not respect or fear men who 'set aside a space in the middle of their own town where they can meet and make false promises to each other [that is, conduct business and trade]' (*Hdt.* 1.153).<sup>29</sup> This to Herodotus is 'an attack on all Greeks' because, while Greeks set aside a place in their towns to buy and sell goods, this market system was a concept unknown to the Persians (1.153).<sup>30</sup> This sentiment, expressed to the Spartans, sums up the incompatibility of oriental imperialism and the still-developing Greek merchant culture.<sup>31</sup> The Persian economic system was socially aristocratic, politically feudal and based on a food producing peasantry that would support the armies and aristocrats. Burn suggests that such an economy may have existed in Greece during the Homeric age, but by the sixth century

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<sup>27</sup> Murray [2] 476.

<sup>28</sup> Shown by the fact that after the revolt itself the Persians undertook a review of the Asian Greek tribute system, although Herodotus tells us that there was not much change in the amount as a result of this review (*Hdt.* 6.43).

<sup>29</sup> Tr. Waterfield [3] 68.

<sup>30</sup> Tr. Waterfield [3] 68.

<sup>31</sup> A. R. Burn, 'Persia and the Greeks', in I. Gershevitch (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran* 2 (Cambridge 1985) 293.

BC Greek civilisation, except Sparta to an extent, was dependant on trade to survive.<sup>32</sup> If Greece had fallen to Persia, it is most likely that Persia would have tried to push Greece 'back' toward its own ideal type of economics probably by promoting tyrant figures and army service for those who were not farmers.<sup>33</sup>

Herodotus generally views the Greek and Persian conflict as one of west versus east and freedom versus tyranny. Cyrus would have been a threat to political development because Persian rule as a whole seemed to promote non-change within society. When Persians conquered lands, they generally did not change local forms of government. During the late seventh and early sixth centuries tyranny seems to have been a 'popular' form of government in Greece, and in Asia Minor there were many tyrant-controlled cities. In the wake of his conquests, Cyrus generally did not change the political order and he supported these tyrants. Dandamaev believes the common view that Persia was simply anti-democratic and pro-tyrannical is false. He argues that Persia only supported tyrants out of tradition, that is, because tyranny was already an 'accepted' form of government in the area.<sup>34</sup> We know that Cyrus was generally kind to subject peoples and as such was known to the Persians as a 'father' (*Hdt.* 3.89);<sup>35</sup> yet to say there was no political motive seems unrealistic. Burn offers a plausible alternative arguing that the Persians would identify a leader in each Greek city and make him its governor or tyrant. The obvious leaders were people already in positions of power such as aristocrats or tyrants. He says that while most cities would govern their own internal affairs in the empire through town meetings, the Persians wanted one strong central figure who would be responsible for the soldiers and for collecting the tribute.<sup>36</sup> Cyrus seems to have had a remarkable tolerance of his subject peoples, which was probably based on respect for their religions, ethnic groups, cultures and previous kingdoms. However, the main reason seems to be because they paid their tributes to him, gave homage and served in his armies. Because of this, placing native rulers in positions of power seems to be something he was happy to do if it meant that the people would be more content. The occasional unfortunate event that could lead to instability in the empire, such as the rebellion of Pacytes after he was placed in charge of the Lydian treasury (*Hdt.* 1.154.),<sup>37</sup> did not seem to deter Cyrus from his policies.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Burn [15] 39. It is rather amusing that this was said to the Spartans, who had an economic structure very similar to that of Persia: the 'true' citizens shunned economics and trade (generally the *perioikoi* would assume these roles), while the helots farmed and produced food for the rest of the society, thus allowing the citizens to train for war. Cyrus would not have known this however when making his generalisations.

<sup>33</sup> The fact that by Darius' time the Persians were minting coins is irrelevant here in a discussion of Cyrus' Persia; it simply shows one of the many changes Darius introduced.

<sup>34</sup> Dandamaev [5] 156.

<sup>35</sup> Tr. Waterfield [3] 208.

<sup>36</sup> Burn [31] 295.

<sup>37</sup> Cyrus may have been happy with the result of Pacytes' rebellion since it showed that the island Ionian cities could be bribed easily and were happy to work with the Persians.

Such policies worked well in places that had long traditions of powerful autocrats and priesthoods such as Jerusalem. They were not as effective in the Greek states probably because the Greek systems were always changing, and tyranny, while familiar to them, was really only a short term form of government. It generally did not extend beyond the second generation since the heirs were not able to control the peoples as skilfully as the charismatic, ambitious original tyrants.

At this time forms of government which included wider citizen participation were beginning to grow in popularity. This process is shown best by Athens, whose democracy of 507 BC set their future policies in relation to Persia. Athens, which became afraid of Spartan involvement after the removal of the Peisistratids in 510 BC,<sup>39</sup> sought Persian aid. However, the Persians at this time firmly supported Hippias and would not support the Athenian state unless it reinstated him (*Hdt.* 5.96). This Athens felt it could not do and therefore it supported Sparta's anti-Persian policy. Proactive Athens went further than Sparta, however, and actually sent aid to Asian Greeks in the form of the twenty ships of 499 BC to aid in the Ionian revolt (5.97). This trend of states developing political ideals away from tyranny is also shown by the fact that the Ionian tyrants themselves knew they were eventually only able to stay in power because of Persian backing and were in effect 'puppet' tyrants (4.137). The Ionian revolt itself, though a failed event for the Greeks, showed how naive Cyrus' policies were when imposed on Greek culture. After the revolt Darius' general Mardonius removed all the remaining tyrannies and installed democracies in the Ionian cities (6.43). While democracy prevailed in the end, it was only achieved via coercion. It therefore seems clear that Persian control would not have helped to develop Greek political ideals.

Using Ionia and the other Asian Greek states as an example, we are able to see what mainland Greece might have become under Persian control. We can see how imposed governments and economic ideals virtually ruined the Ionian cities, turning them from wealthy, powerful states to subject people who really do not feature in Greek history again. To prevent this from happening on mainland Greece itself, firm anti-Persian positions were needed by the leading Greek states. Sparta was at the time the most powerful state and played a vital role in this period. The fact that it did not actually engage the Persians or aid those fighting the Persians is important, mainly because such non-engagement could be seen as a partial reason for Cyrus' success in Lydia and Asia Minor. Yet Sparta's national anti-Persian stance, its immediate reaction to Cyrus, is more important, for it allowed other Greek states to stand behind it, safe in the knowledge that Sparta would always stand against western Persian expansion and would eventually act, especially if its own interests were at stake.

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<sup>38</sup> Murray [2] 42.

<sup>39</sup> Herodotus says that Cleomenes and the Lacedaemonians were up in arms against the Athenians because Cleomenes had tried to force the expulsion of Cleisthenes and his supporters, which allowed Isagras to rule very briefly in Athens as an oligarchy (*Hdt.* 5.72).