THE RISE AND FALL OF ARTAXERXES IV (ARSES): A REASSESSMENT

EL ASCENSO Y LA CAÍDA DE ARTAJERJES IV (ARSÉS): UNA RECONSIDERACIÓN

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Recibido el 28 de agosto de 2021
Aceptado el 25 de febrero de 2022

ABSTRACT:

According to the classical literature, the reign of Artaxerxes IV, better known as Arses, is dominated by court intrigues, orchestrated by the Great King's top official at the expense of the Achaemenid dynasty. This narrative is however contradicted by two cuneiform tablets, which dispute the unfolding of these events and the alleged role of their protagonists. In the present study, these conflicting testimonies are juxtaposed to each other and critically examined, in an effort to establish a more nuanced and complete picture of the dynastic transitions in question, as well as of the geopolitical circumstances, under which they occurred.

RESUMEN:

Según la literatura clásica, el reinado de Artajerjes IV, más conocido como Arsés, está dominado por las intrigas de la corte, orquestadas por el máximo funcionario del Gran Rey a costa de la dinastía aqueménida. Sin embargo, esta narrativa se contradice con dos tablillas cuneiformes, que disputan tanto el desarrollo de estos hechos como el supuesto papel de sus protagonistas. En el presente estudio, estos testimonios contradictorios se yuxtaponen entre sí y se examinan críticamente, en un esfuerzo por establecer una imagen más matizada y completa de las transiciones dinásticas en cuestión, así como del contexto geopolítico en el que se produjeron.

KEY-WORDS: Persian Empire, Arses/Artaxerxes IV, Darius III, revolt, conspiracy.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Imperio persa, Arsés/Artajerjes IV, Dario III, rebelión, conspiración.

I. Introduction

The study of the later period of the Achaemenid Empire's history is often a challenging task for modern historiography. The time between the Peace of Antalcidas

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(387 B.C.) and the beginning of the Macedonian invasion (334 B.C.) remains particularly unclear, because of the gaps in the Greek-Latin literature, the principal source for Persian political history. Xenophon loses his interest in Persian affairs, once the involvement of Greek city-states stops, Ctesias has already left the Persian court and neither Quintus Curtius Rufus nor Arrian focus their attention on Persian matters before the Macedonian invasion. As a result, for the study of the reign of Artaxerxes III and his successor's, we mainly rely on ambiguous allusions made by Athenian orators and the *Historical Library*, the global history composed by Diodorus Siculus.

The *Historical Library* is an ambitious work summarising the history of the Mediterranean world and the Middle East from the times of the Neo-Assyrian Kingdom to the Late Roman Republic. The attention of its author is monopolised by Sicilian, Greek and Roman affairs, but the history of the Persian Empire is also included, albeit in a more superficial manner[2]. Diodorus Siculus is often an invaluable source, because he enumerates historical events, which are otherwise ignored by the available sources, but his narration is not flawless. The massive scope of the *Historical Library* and its annalistic, as well condensed structure, often render Diodorus' testimony extremely brief and confusing[3].

A typical example of this issue is the reign of Artaxerxes IV (338-336/335 B. C.), better known under his personal name, Arses. Arses was the son and successor of Artaxerxes III, under whom Egypt was finally reconquered after more than two generations of independence, as well as the predecessor of Darius III, famous for being the main opponent of Alexander. Unlike them, however, the fact that Arses ruled the empire for only two years and that he was hardly involved in Greek affairs means that his reign remains exceptionally obscure, with the vast majority of Greek-Roman authors ignoring him completely and very few samples of epigraphic or cuneiform evidence concerning his reign surviving today[4]. In fact, Diodorus is essentially the only narrative source detailing the circumstances of Arses' rise and fall from power, in a testimony so brief, repetitive and stereotypical that raises several doubts about its historicity[5].

The goal of the present study is therefore to examine Diodorus' account about Arses' reign, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. Diodorus' narration is then juxtaposed with the testimony of a large variety of sources, originating from different cultural, chronological and geographical backgrounds, which either corroborate or dispute Diodorus' claims. More specifically, the contribution of cuneiform tablets, ranging from astronomical diaries to prophecies and royal lists, is particularly highlighted, but evidence from Egypt is also taken into consideration, in order to better understand the conditions prevailing over the imperial provinces during Arses' reign. The intent behind the comparisons between these diverse and often contradictory sources is to reconstruct the conditions, under which Arses gained and lost the imperial throne, as well as the internal and external factors that contributed to these dynastic transitions.

Finally, it should also be mentioned that, similarly to its treatment by the Greek-Latin literature, the reign of Arses is a somewhat neglected subject in modern historiography[6]. The older works, inevitably relying exclusively on the Greek-Roman authors, are usually limited to paraphrasing Diodorus' account[7]. During the last three decades and following the new wave in Achaemenid historiography, marked by a critical examination of the literary sources and an innovative emphasis on non-Greek primary sources, Diodorus' narrative is no longer accepted uncritically, but the studies of Arses'

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2 For the place of the Persian Empire in the *Historical Library* of Diodorus, see Lenfant (ed.) 2011, 121-143.

3 For a summary of Diodorus' methodology, perspective and problems, see Stronk 2017, 9-14.

4 On the cuneiform tablets related to Arses' reign, see Hackl, Oelsner 2018, 692-704.

5 Pirngruber 2011, 283-284.

6 For a recent overview of Achaemenid historiography, especially in what concerns political-military matters and with a focus on the need to consult all kinds of available sources, see Manning 2021, 22-63.

7 For instance, see Olmstead 1948, 489-490, Cook 1983, 225, Badian 1985, 421-422, Dandamaev 1989, 312-314 and Badian 2000, 53.

reign remain quite brief[8]. Furthermore, even in articles principally focused on the cuneiform corpus, most of the attention is orientated towards Darius III and Alexander III[9]. The present study thus also intends to cover this small gap in Achaemenid historiography, which however connects the last moments of the empire with the reign of Artaxerxes III, when the Persian Empire reclaimed approximately the same territorial mass it controlled under Xerxes I.

II. Diodorus' account

Diodorus introduces the story[10] about the transition from Artaxerxes III to Darius III by underlining the cruelty and harshness of the former's regime. Artaxerxes became so despised that Bagoas poisoned him, with the help of the court physician. According to Diodorus, Bagoas was a eunuch, who, despite his mutilation, was also the chiliarch of the Great King's court, the most prominent position in the imperial administration[11]. In addition to the chiliarchy, Bagoas had also been given the command of the eastern satrapies, as a reward for his satisfying performance as a commander during the Egyptian campaign[12]. Having disposed of Artaxerxes, Bagoas installed Arses, the deceased ruler's youngest son, to the throne, because his young age rendered him more malleable to the manipulative court official. Meanwhile, the older brothers of the prince were massacred, so as to secure Bagoas' influence over the Great King.

Despite all that, Arses was upset at his minister's violent acts and was prepared to punish him accordingly, but Bagoas anticipated the moves of his former puppet by murdering Arses and all his children during the third year of his reign. Having thus virtually exterminated the imperial family, Bagoas chose a certain Darius for the throne, who was a distant cousin of Arses, Darius II (424 – 404 B.C.) being his paternal great-grandfather[13]. Bagoas attempted however to poison Darius as well, but the Great King, having been

8 Cf. Walker 1997, 22, Brosius 2006, 31, Kuhrt 2007, 418-419 and Waters 2014, 197-199. Briant 1996, 789-797 studies the transition from Arses to Darius more extensively, but his interest is mainly concentrated on the various literary traditions attempting to legitimise or delegitimise Darius' ascension to power. The *Dynastic Prophecy*, the only available cuneiform source attesting the fall of Arses, is also taken into consideration (Briant 1996, 883-884), but essentially in what concerns the reception of Darius and Alexander among the Babylonian elites.

9 For example, the studies about the *Dynastic Prophecy*, the principal cuneiform source about Arses' reign, are mainly interested in the last part of the text, regarding the manner in which the Babylonian elites perceived the conflict between Darius III and Alexander III (cf. Grayson 1975, 24-27, Lambert 1978, 12-13, Sherwin-White 1987, 11, Del Monte 2001, 146-148, Van der Spek 2003, 324-340, Neujahr 2005, 102-107 and Loddo 2018, 28-29).

10 Diod. Sic. XVII, 5, 3 – 6, 3.

11 The demarcation of the jurisdiction of the chiliarch (*hazarapatiš* in Old Persian) is not an easy task, because of the ambiguity of the available sources' testimony (for a concise summary of the references to the chiliarchy found in ancient literature, see Cagnazzi 2009, 285-286). The Persian *hazarapatiš* has been compared to the Grand Viziers of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires (see, for example, Junge 1940, 28-31 and Bosworth 1988, 34), but these examples are quite anachronistic for the case of Achaemenid Persia (Chaumont 1973, 141-142, Lewis 1977, 17-18 and Meeus 2009, 302-303). The military role of the *hazarapatiš* as the commander of an elite cavalry unit has also been underlined (Meeus 2009, 308), but the picture is still far from clear (cf. Collins 2012, 159-169 and Charles 2016b, 405-410). What is certain however is that Bagoas, in his capacity as the chiliarch of Artaxerxes' and Arses' courts, held a great amount of political strength, prestige and influence over the Great King. For a study on the references to Bagoas as chiliarch in the ancient historiography, see Charles 2015, 290-293. Charles expresses his doubts over whether Bagoas was truly the chiliarch of the Great King or not, but he nonetheless accepts that Bagoas definitely held a very important position in the Persian court.

12 Diod. Sic. XVI, 50, 8. The historicity of this remark is however suspect (Briant 1996, 795). It might be a rhetorical invention of Diodorus' source, designed to illustrate the parallels between the careers of Bagoas and the Rhodian mercenary Mentor, who had also participated in the Egyptian expedition and who had been given a military command in the western coast of Asia Minor (Diod. Sic. XVI, 52, 2)

13 According to Diodorus (XVII, 5, 5), Darius was the son of Oarsanes/Arsanes and the grandson of Ostanes, who was the brother of Artaxerxes II and therefore the son of Darius II.

informed about the planned regicide, forced the chiliarch to drink from the poisoned cup. Diodorus concludes his testimony with a praise for Darius' bravery. More specifically, during the campaign of Artaxerxes III against the Cadusii[14], Darius was the only one to respond to a challenge offered by an intimidating Cadusian warrior. Having defeated his opponent, Darius was amply rewarded by the Persian monarch and it was in fact this demonstration of martial prowess that led him to be selected as the next Great King.

III. From Artaxerxes to Arses

So much for Diodorus. As for the rest of the Greek-Latin literature, the assassination of Artaxerxes III is generally ignored with only two exceptions. Plutarch simply mentions[15] that Bagoas bestowed the monarchy to Arses and then to Darius without further elaborating on the issue, but Aelian is more descriptive. He reports[16] that Bagoas, who was actually Egyptian, slew Artaxerxes, whom he deeply hated, because the latter had slaughtered the sacred Apis bull during the reconquest of Egypt. Aelian also adds a rather morbid story of how Bagoas mistreated Artaxerxes' body, by mutilating it and feeding it to the cats[17].

Aelian's account is evidently fictitious and logically incoherent. He is the only one to allude to the supposedly Egyptian origins of Bagoas, despite his name being Iranian[18], and his reasoning about the assassin's motivations is indirectly contradicted by the fact that Bagoas himself actively participated in the campaign against Egypt[19]. The macabre details of the abuse Artaxerxes' body received at the hands of Bagoas further confirm the apocryphal background of the legend Aelian cites. In fact, the allusions to the Apis bull and the felines strongly indicate that the original source was Egyptian[20]. Artaxerxes III's posthumous reputation in Egypt was quite negative, either because of the severity of the reprisals he ordered following the subjugation of the country[21] or because of the demands of Ptolemaic propaganda[22] or due to a combination of both factors. Consequently, the story

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14 The Cadusii were an Iranian, nomadic, mountain tribe living to the north-west of modern Iran, in an ill-defined region between northern Media, the Caspian Sea, Caucasus and Armenia (Strab. XI, 13, 4). The mountainous topography of their homeland and the absence of large, urban communities rendered them extremely difficult to subjugate for the sedentary empires of the Middle East. They were a constant nuisance to the Great King and his local officials. The fact that they lived in the western extremities of Media indicates that the pacification of the region may have also fallen under the responsibilities of the satrap of Armenia. For a catalogue of the available sources concerning the location of the Cadusii, see Potts 2014, 108-109.

15 Plut. *Mor*. *De Alex*. *Fort*. 2, 5.

16 Ael. *VH* VI, 8. See also Sulpicius Severus, *Chronicle*, II,14.

17 According to the alternative version, quoted by Souda (s.v. *Λαβαῖς*), it was Bagoas himself that ate Artaxerxes.

18 Bagoas is the hellenised version of the Old Persian name Bagāvahyā (Tavernier 2007, 141). There is the possibility that Bagoas was an Egyptian who had adopted a Persian name, but the likeliest scenario is that Aelian's source simply invented Bagoas' Egyptian ethnicity for the plot needs of his vengeance story.

19 Diodorus even reports (XVI, 51, 2) that Bagoas demanded and received ransom from the Egyptian priests for the hieroglyphic inscriptions Artaxerxes had confiscated, during the pillage of the Egyptian temples. The historicity of the comment is very suspect, but it nonetheless illustrates the contradictory portraits of Bagoas in Diodorus and Aelian, in what concerns the official's relationship with the Egyptians.

20 Schwartz 1949, 69-70 and Briant 1996, 281.

21 Artaxerxes is also accused of devouring the sacred bull (Aelian *NA* X, 28, Plut. *Mor*. *De Is*. *et Os*. 11 and Souda s.v. *Ἆπις*) and of sacrificing it to the Donkey (Aelian *VH* IV, 8), most probably a reference to the “evil” god Seth (Lenfant 2009, 199). Artaxerxes is not the only Persian ruler to be blamed for such a blasphemous act, as Herodotus (III, 29) claims that Cambyses II had also slain Apis. These obvious similarities hint at a stereotypical narrative of dubious historical value (Ray 1987, 90-91, Ruzicka 2012, 197, Colburn 2015, 181-183 and Wojciechowska 2016, 73-75). It is indeed very probable that the severity of Artaxerxes' reprisals has been significantly exaggerated, but it is also reasonable to assume that the restoration of the Achaemenid rule in Egypt was hardly a peaceful process welcomed by all.

22 The condemnation of the Persian domination was a common theme in Ptolemaic royal inscriptions.

Aelian quotes is probably the product of a tradition hostile to Artaxerxes and manufactured by the Egyptian clergy, which heavily distorted the conditions of the Great King's death, in order to present it under the terms of divine retribution for the atrocities Artaxerxes may have committed against the Egyptian religious establishment[23].

Aelian's obvious unreliability aside, the account of Diodorus about the demise of Artaxerxes III also poses several obstacles in its interpretation. Its main theme, Bagoas' extraordinary influence, who is perfectly capable of eliminating every member of the imperial dynasty on his path, appears particularly simplistic and stereotypical, generally conforming to common motifs about the scheming and manipulative skills of court officials, who are able to control their royal puppets at whim[24]. Furthermore, the content of Diodorus' account is deeply repetitive. The confrontations between Bagoas and the three Great Kings share several similarities, like the use of poisons and the purging of the assassinated ruler's offspring. In general, as a result of the summarising and strictly chronological structure of the *Historical Library*, Diodorus sometimes tends to inadvertently duplicate the same events[25]. We cannot assume that the assassination of Arses was accidentally fabricated by Diodorus, because the Sicilian historian seems perfectly aware of two separate regicides taking place and because the story is also corroborated by Aelian's independent testimony[26].

However, it can be concluded that at least some of the details were invented either by Diodorus or more probably by his original source. Namely, Diodorus' affirmation that all the siblings of Arses were massacred by Bagoas is contradicted by Arrian, who attests[27] that Alexander met Bisthanes, one of Artaxerxes III's sons, in western Iran in 330 B.C. Attempts have been made to explain this apparent contradiction, by suggesting that Bisthanes was an illegitimate son of Artaxerxes[28], but historically dubious claims about indiscriminate exterminations of Persian aristocratic families are a common occurrence in Greek literature[29]. The fact that the same fate had also been reported for the sons of

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Ptolemaic rulers aimed at legitimising their rule over the Nile valley and delta by presenting themselves as the restorers of the past glory and prosperity, which had been supposedly severely damaged during the Persian occupation of the country (Colburn 2015, 168-181).

23 The excruciating death of an unpopular ruler is a common *topos* in ancient literature. The demise of Antiochus IV (*2 Macc*. IX, 5-9) and Herod I (Joseph. *AJ*, XVII, 6, 5) are two of the most iconic examples, but the motif of agonising and humiliating deaths reserved for religious opponents becomes particularly common in early Christian literature, of which Lactantius' *On the Death of the Persecutors* is the most characteristic example.

24 On the literary motif of manipulative and omnipotent court officials, see Kuhrt 2007, 419 and Ruzicka 2012, 203. For a less skeptical approach, see Keaveney 2010, 499-509.

25 A typical example of this phenomenon is Diodorus' often confusing description of the Third Sacred War (356-346 B.C.) between Phocis and the Amphictyonic League. For a concise summary of Diodorus' duplicates in this specific case, see Buckler 1989, 161-195.

26 Plutarch, on the other hand, could have simply consulted Diodorus, but Aelian definitely used an alternative source, considering the unique details included in his work.

27 Arr. *Anab*. III, 19, 4.

28 Heckel 2020, 158. To support his hypothesis, Heckel suggests that had Bisthanes been a legitimate son of Artaxerxes III, he would have strongly contested the seizure of the throne by Darius III and Bessus (Artaxerxes V). However, neither for Darius nor for Bessus did their genealogies play any major role in their accession to the throne. On the contrary, what mattered especially in violent dynastic transitions was the political capital of each candidate and not his pedigree (Briant 2002, 43-49). After all, the fact that he was the illegitimate son of Artaxerxes I did not prevent Sogdianus from overthrowing Xerxes II, the successor and only legitimate son of the deceased king (Ctes. Fr. 15 § 48). In any case, nowhere does Diodorus attest that the massacre of the royal offspring concerned only the legitimate sons of the Great Kings, but, on the contrary, he observes (XVII, 5, 3) that the royal house was virtually extinguished. On the other hand, Badian 2000, 247-250 not only accepts the claim that Artaxerxes purged all his relatives, but he also uses it to reject the possibility of Darius III being a member of the Achaemenid dynasty.

29 For example, Ctesias attests (Fr. 15 § 56) that several of the siblings of the future queen Stateira were executed on the orders of queen Parysatis during the reign of Darius II (424-404 B.C.). However, in the aftermath of the battle of Counaxa (401 B.C.), Xenophon mentions (*An*. II, 3, 17) an anonymous brother of Stateira, who participated in the embassy sent to the Greek mercenaries. Additionally, following the failed coup of Darius against Artaxerxes II, Justin insists (*Epit*. X, 2, 6) that all the conspirator's partisans and their

Arses[30] and the relatives of Artaxerxes III[31] further undermines the credibility of the allegation.

Additionally, Diodorus' narrative appears unconvincing and logically incoherent. To begin with, Diodorus' interpretation of Bagoas' motives is hardly credible. Even if we accept the unreliable claims about Artaxerxes' extraordinary cruelty[32], that still does not explain why Bagoas, himself rewarded for his active involvement in the Egyptian campaign and still dominating the upper echelons of the court hierarchy, would suddenly turn against his patron[33]. The reason for the friction between Bagoas and Arses appears equally absurd, as it is difficult to explain why Arses reacted to his dignitary's savagery more than two years after his father and his siblings had been eliminated. An additional inconsistency is the fact that Arses is introduced as Artaxerxes' youngest and therefore most malleable son and yet, in the time of his assassination, less than three years later, Arses was apparently already old enough to father numerous children[34].

The fact that, according to Diodorus himself, Arses had therefore reached adulthood indicates that his father died in an advanced age. After all, Artaxerxes had been ruling the Achaemenid Empire for more than twenty years, since late 359 or early 358 B.C.[35]. Additionally, his father, Artaxerxes II, is reported to have died in a very old age[36], while Darius, the elder brother of Artaxerxes III and heir apparent to Artaxerxes II, was executed for conspiracy at the age of fifty[37]. From the above, we can extrapolate that Artaxerxes III was most probably born in the 5th century B.C., which means that he had surpassed the average life expectancy for his era, when he died in September 338 B.C.[38], even if we take into consideration the more comfortable living conditions reserved for the elite. In consequence, given the aforementioned contradictions, logical inconsistencies,

families were summarily executed. This claim is however contradicted by Plutarch (*Vit*. *Artax*. 30, 4), according to whom, Arpates, the adult male son of Tiribazus, who was Darius' most prominent collaborator, actually survived the massacre.

30 Diod. Sic. XVII, 5, 4.

31 Curt. X, 5, 23, Just. *Epit*. X, 3, 1 and Val. Max. IX, 2, ext. 7.

32 For Artaxerxes III's negative portrait among the Greek-Roman historians, see Mildenberg 1999, 202-223.

33 Ruzicka 2006, 236 suggests that Bagoas may have murdered Artaxerxes, in order to avoid punishment for his mediocre performance during the Egyptian expedition. Bagoas is indeed often sidelined by the Greek mercenaries during the war against Egypt, but the narration of Diodorus is very suspect on this regard, because of his tendency to exaggerate the exploits of Greek soldiers at the expense of the "barbarians" (Rop 2019, 148-175). After all, as already mentioned, Diodorus himself attests that Bagoas was rewarded for his role in the war against Egypt.

34 Diod. Sic. XVII, 5, 4.

35 Based on the evidence of cuneiform tablets, Artaxerxes III must have succeeded his father sometime between 25 November 359 B.C. and 11 April 358 B.C. (Depuydt 2008, 37).

36 The exact age of Artaxerxes II is difficult to be determined with precision. Plutarch, having consulted the *Persica* of Dinon, mentions (*Vit*. *Artax*. 30, 5) that Artaxerxes died at the age of ninety-four. On the contrary, Lucian of Samosata notes (*Macr*. 15) that Artaxerxes died at the age of eighty-six, but he also adds Dinon's version of Artaxerxes dying at ninety-four. Moysey 1992, 161 suggests that the number ninety-four simply stands for the bibliographic reference to Dinon's work and that Plutarch misunderstood Lucian's remark. Moysey's hypothesis is however untenable, because Lucian was a later author than Plutarch. In any case, neither version is particularly reliable, because Artaxerxes being born in 442 B.C. would imply an extraordinarily durable fertility for his mother, Parysatis, whose second son, Cyrus the Younger, and her subsequent offspring (Ctesias, Fr. 15 § 51), were born after 425 B.C. Therefore, both ninety-four and eighty-six are probably just rhetorical hyperbole, the product of Artaxerxes II's reputation as a Methuselah during the Antiquity. Besides, Plutarch also exaggerates the length of Artaxerxes II's reign, suggesting (*Vit*. *Artax*. 30, 5) that he ruled for sixty two years, instead of forty-six (404 – 359/358 B.C.). In conclusion, if we take into consideration that Cyrus the Younger was born around 424 B.C., we can deduce that Artaxerxes II was probably a septuagenarian at the time of his death (Lenfant 2009, 192).

37 Plut. *Vit*. *Artax*. 26, 2. It is interesting to note that Plutarch later calls (*Vit*. *Artax*. 28, 1) him a young man (*νεανίσκῳ*), a description adopted by Justin as well (*Epit*. X, 2, 5). Darius being fifty years old sounds more credible though, given his father's advanced age. The second version could have been used in relative terms, defining Darius as a relatively young prince in opposition to the older Great King and the other conspirators involved in the failed coup.

38 *BM* 71537, (rev.) col. iii, l. 9-10.

stereotypical repetitions and literary elements in the accounts of Diodorus and Aelian, there is a strong suspicion that Artaxerxes III might have actually died from natural causes, instead of allegedly being the victim of a court intrigue.

This hypothesis is further reinforced by the testimony of a Babylonian astronomical tablet (*BM* 71537), which enumerates the eclipses observed in Babylon, in relation with the reigns of the rulers of Babylonia. The catalogue of the eclipses spans from the Babylonian king Nabonassar (747-734 B.C.) until the early Hellenistic period and Antigonus the One-Eyed (316-305 B.C.). In regards to Artaxerxes III, the text simply mentions that the Great King met his destiny (*šīmtum*[39]) and that he was succeeded by his son, Arses[40]. "Meeting your destiny" is a euphemism for death caused by natural causes, without any insinuations about violence. Theoretically, there is the possibility that the scribe refrained from open frankness, because of the political implications an unambiguous reference to the monarch's assassination might have entailed. However, the tablet was composed in a time, when the Achaemenid Empire had already been dissolved, so there was no political risk for openly stating that Artaxerxes III had been murdered.

Moreover, Babylonian scribes did not hesitate to explicitly mention violent, dynastic transitions. A second astronomical tablet enumerating the lunar eclipses since the reign of Nabopolassar (626-605 B.C.) explicitly confirms that Xerxes I was assassinated[41] by his son[42]. In addition to Xerxes' assassination, as noted in the following paragraphs, the violent overthrow of Arses is also clearly attested in another cuneiform tablet. Therefore, there is no solid reason to discard the contradiction between the astronomical text, on the one hand, and Diodorus, Aelian and Plutarch, on the other, over the circumstances of Artaxerxes III's death.

So, whom should we believe? As previously explained, the historical value of Diodorus' and Aelian's passages is extremely dubious. Their account is deeply marked by a variety of apocryphal, stereotypical, contradictory and logically incoherent elements, which do not inspire much confidence in the accuracy of their claims. On the contrary, the Babylonian text, albeit less detailed, is much closer, geographically and chronologically, to the events it describes and is also much less influenced by the didactic and literary perspectives of Aelian, Diodorus and their sources. Moreover, its testimony makes perfect sense, considering Artaxerxes' advanced age, and does not require the logical leaps necessary, if we rely exclusively on the Greek-Roman authors. Thus, although absolute certainty is not feasible, it can be concluded that Artaxerxes III most probably died from natural causes[43]. The conditions of his death were subsequently misunderstood, as a result of either the hostile tradition of the Egyptian priesthood, anxious to condemn the deceased Achaemenid, or inaccurate rumours, largely shaped by the circumstances of Arses' fall from power.

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[39] Labat 1976, 327, Reiner (ed.) 1992, 16-17, Huehnergard 1997, 523 and Black, George, Postgate (eds.) 2000, 372. On the specific case of Arses, see Walker 1997, 22.

[40] *BM* 71537, (rev.) col. iii, l. 9-10: KIN ˡ*Ú-ma-kuš* NAM^{me} *Ár-šú* ˹DUMU˺-*šú ina* AŠ.TE TUŠ-*ab*. For the transcription of the tablet, see Hunger 2001, 42. Artaxerxes is called Úmakuš, which is the Akkadian version of the sovereign's personal name [Vauka or Vahuš in Old Persian and Ochus in Greek (Schmitt 2006, 206-208)].

[41] *BM* 32234, (rev.), col. iv, l. 4: IZI 14$^{?}$ ˹*Ḫi-si*$^{?}$˺-*ár-šú* DUMU-*šú* GAZ-*šú*. For the transcription of the sentence in question, see Hunger 2001, 20. The verb *dâku* is regularly used in Akkadian texts to describe defeat or murder, depending on the context [Oppenheim (ed.) 1959, 36-40, Labat 1976, 299, Huehnergard 1997, 491 and Black, George, Postgate (eds.) 2000, 53-54].

[42] The identity of the assassin mentioned in the document remains mysterious. He has been identified with Darius, Xerxes' firstborn son and heir apparent to the throne (Allen 2005, 188 and Depuydt 2008, 9), but the likeliest candidate is the future Great King Artaxerxes I himself (Wiesehöfer 2007, 6-7).

[43] Brosius 2006, 31 and Waters 2014, 197.

IV. From Arses to Darius

Many of the aforementioned issues of Diodorus' account about the death of Artaxerxes are also present in the passage concerning the fall of Arses and the rise of Darius. Diodorus' explanation about the friction between Arses and Bagoas is hardly convincing, while we can also notice the pattern of the extermination of the assassinated monarch's children, the simplistic portrayal of Bagoas as an omnipotent kingmaker[44] and the contradictory[45] closing remark about Darius gaining the kingship thanks to his military valour, instead of Bagoas' machinations. In regards to the rest of the available sources, some repeat that Darius was the puppet of Bagoas, others prefer the second and more sympathetic towards Darius version regarding his martial prowess, while a third group gives Darius a much more active role in the coup d'état against Arses.

In what concerns the first group, Strabo simply attests[46], in a neutral manner, that Arses was murdered by Bagoas, who then appointed Darius as the next Great King, although he did not belong to the royal kin[47]. Plutarch, on the other hand, is more hostile towards the Achaemenid monarch. Plutarch does not provide any details about the coup d'état against Arses, but he comments on the background of Darius, calling him[48] the slave[49] and the royal courier of the Great King. These derogatory remarks can theoretically be the result of a cultural misunderstanding[50] or allusions to Darius' early career in the imperial administration as the head of the postal service[51]. However, the reliability of Plutarch's affirmations is undermined, if we take into account the rhetorical context, in which these comments are made. Namely, Plutarch's objective is to exalt Alexander's glory, by highlighting the Macedonian conqueror's illustrious origins and exploits and by simultaneously denigrating his Persian opponent. Therefore, although the remark about Darius being the royal courier is specific enough that it can be considered as a reference to Darius' past in the higher echelons of the royal, postal service, a generally skeptical approach when dealing with Plutarch is certainly recommended.

On the contrary, Justin's representation[52] of Darius' career is much more positive. Justin begins his story with the war of Artaxerxes III against the Cadusii. In the course of this conflict, a certain Codomanus distinguished himself by defeating a fearsome Cadusian warrior. For his bravery, he was rewarded with the satrapy of Armenia and, following Artaxerxes' death, the Persian people, remembering his past valiance, declared him Great King. Justin concludes his story by adding that Codomanus changed his name to Darius[53]

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44 The image of Bagoas pulling the strings of power virtually unopposed is prefaced by Diodorus (XVI, 50, 8: *τοὺς διαδόχους αἰεὶ τῆς βασιλείας οὗτος ἀπεδείκνυτο καὶ πάντα βασιλέως εἶχε πλὴν τῆς προσηγορίας*), when he summarises the promotions granted to Bagoas during the reign of Artaxerxes III.

45 Briant 2003, 201-202.

46 Strab. XV, 3, 24.

47 This could be either a reference to the fact that Darius was a direct relative of neither Artaxerxes III nor Arses or a total rejection of the prince's affiliation with the Achaemenid dynasty. The denial of Darius' Achaemenid origins is probably the product of hostile, Macedonian propaganda, aiming at raising doubts over the dynastic legitimacy of Alexander's Persian adversary.

48 Plut. *Mor*. *De Alex*. *Fort*. 1, 2 and *Vit*. *Alex*. 18, 8. To refer to the office of the royal courier, Plutarch uses the term *astandes* (*ἀστάνδου*, the singular genitive form of *ἀστάνδης*), which is the phonetic transcription to Greek of a Persian word.

49 This label is also used by Aelian (*VH* XII, 43).

50 Namely, the use of the word *δοῦλος* (slave) by the Greek authors can be the result of a misleading translation of the Old Persian word *bandaka*. *Bandaka* generally refers to the subjects and the officials of the Great King, like the members of the imperial administration. They were of course socially and politically inferior to the Achaemenid monarch, but not his property. A linguistic confusion between the words *bandaka* and *δοῦλος* is an attractive hypothesis (Charles 2016a, 55-58), but it has not been yet verified beyond any reasonable doubt (Lenfant 2015, 102-104).

51 Badian 2000, 250 and Charles 2016a, 54-55.

52 Just. *Epit*. X, 3, 2-7.

53 Badian 2000, 247-249 considers the name Codomanus to be of Semitic etymology, as well as Darius' natal name. However, according to a cuneiform tablet about planetary moves during the Neo-Babylonian and

and that he bravely confronted Alexander, albeit without much fortune. Justin portrays Darius in a noticeably positive manner, describing him as a valiant warrior and adversary of Alexander, but, similarly to Plutarch's contemptuous remarks, the reliability of his account is dubious.

The idealising portrait of Justin is most probably a relic of Darius' legitimising narrative. Namely, the Achaemenid ruler attempted to justify his hold on power, achieved through violent means, by introducing himself as a brilliant duelist that gained the right to the throne thanks to his military prowess[54]. Even the complete omission of Arses, since Darius is described as the direct successor of Artaxerxes III, could be the result of the *damnatio memoriae* of Darius' overthrown predecessor[55]. Justin's account is thus more rhetorical than historical and therefore its reliability is quite suspect. That being said, the choice of the Cadusii as Darius' adversaries[56] and especially the unexpectedly specific reference to Armenia might not be random. Similarly to Plutarch's comment about Darius being a royal courier, they may reflect the fact that Darius served as the satrap of Armenia under the reigns of Artaxerxes and Arses. In contrast to the denigrating remarks of Plutarch about Darius, the governorship of Armenia was a prestigious post, perfectly suitable for someone that subsequently managed to seize the imperial throne[57].

The last Greek-Latin source also revolves around Darius' legitimacy as Great King, but towards the opposite direction. Namely, Arrian cites a letter Alexander sent to Darius, where the Macedonian king rejects the Persian monarch's overtures for peace and alliance. Amidst a variety of accusations, Alexander also blames[58] Darius for slaying Arses, in cooperation with Bagoas, and for unjustly usurping the royal authority against the laws of the Persians. Alexander's accusations, in spite of confirming the violent circumstances of Arses' fall from power, dispute Diodorus' rather simplistic narrative of Bagoas being exclusively responsible for Arses' demise, with Darius being nothing but the nefarious conspirator's involuntary puppet. Alexander's version, as cited by Arrian, is thus more sophisticated, but also less impartial. The aim of Alexander is not to present an objective testimony of recent Persian history, but to justify his expansionist policy at the expense of the Achaemenids, by condemning the past actions of Darius[59].

However, the possibility of Darius playing a much more decisive role in the coup against Arses is corroborated by a second, independent source that does not share Alexander's obvious bias. More specifically, the clay tablet of the early Hellenistic period known as the *Dynastic Prophecy* describes the various dynastic transitions in Mesopotamia and their impact on Babylon from the times of the Neo-Assyrian Kingdom to the dissolution of the Achaemenid Empire. In regards to the transition from Artaxerxes to Arses, the clay tablet is too damaged to extract any meaningful conclusion. Its quality improves considerably though, when it comes to the succession of Arses by Darius, although the text remains rather fragmentary in certain instances. According to the *Dynastic Prophecy*[60], an anonymous king, having ruled for two years, will be[61] murdered by

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Persian periods [*BM* 45740, (rev.) col. iv, l. 5], Darius' original name was most probably Artašata (Nylander 1993, 147 and Briant 2003, 64-65).

54 For a study of the literary and ideological patterns of such duels between prominent warriors during the Persian history, from the Byzantine-Sassanid wars to the Šâhnâme, Ferdowsi's famous epic, see Briant 2003, 199-212.

55 Briant 1996, 796-797.

56 On the other hand, it should also be noted that Codomanus/Darius was not the only Persian to get a chance to manifest his valour during the wars against the Cadusii. According to Plutarch (*Vit*. *Artax*. 24, 2-5), Tiribazus managed to extricate Artaxerxes II from a strategically perilous position, by manipulating the tribal chiefs of the Caduisii. In contrast to Darius, however, the achievement of Tiribazus was more diplomatic than martial.

57 For example, Ochus, who subsequently also adopted the royal name Darius II (404-424 B.C.), rebelled and defeated Sogdianus, from his position as satrap of Hyrcania (Ctes. Fr. 15 § 47) in north-eastern Iran.

58 Arr. *Anab*. II, 14, 5.

59 Briant 2002, 47-49.

60 *BM* 40623, col. v, l. 4-8: 2 MU.AN.NA.MEŠ [LUGAL-*ú-tu* DÙ-*uš*] LUGAL *šá-a-šú* ^{lú}*ša-re-*[*ši .. .. ..*] ⌜*a*⌝-*a-um-*

a court dignitary. A certain prince[62] will then rise up and exercise the kingship for five years, until the invasion of the troops of the land of the Hani[63].

The text is very brief and lacks crucial information, such as the name of the protagonists, but the historical context of the passage, such as the arrival of the Macedonians and the duration of the two monarchs' reigns leaves no doubt that they are respectively Arses and Darius. The assassin, who is called *ša rēši*, a title that corresponds to a superior post in the administrative hierarchy of the Persian court[64], should be identified with Bagoas. In comparison to the account of Diodorus, although the *Dynastic Prophecy* clearly confirms the involvement of Bagoas in the assassination and overthrow of Arses, it also underlines the contribution of Darius. Not only Darius plays a more active role than being a mere puppet at the hands of Bagoas, but the verb *tebû*, which is employed to describe his actions, usually implies something more than a simple court intrigue.

The triconsonantal root *tb'* can acquire a large variety of meanings, depending on the geographical, chronological and thematic context of the tablet. In the case of the *Dynastic Prophecy*, a divinatory text mainly interested in political and dynastic transitions, *tebû* corresponds to a movement of a political-military nature, in opposition to the regime mentioned in the previous lines. Technically, it could refer to a court conspiracy, like Diodorus suggests, but *tebû* is more closely associated with the emergence of a military movement directed against the established order and not just a palace coup[65]. We can notice these specific connotations in the rest of the instances, where *tebû* is attested in the *Dynastic Prophecy*: the Babylonian uprising of Nabopolassar against the Assyrian

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ma ^{lú}NUN-ʳ*ú*ˀ [*ha-am-ma-'u*] ʳZIˀ-*am-ma* (blank) AŠ.T[E *i-ṣab-bat*] 5 MU.AN.NA.MEŠ LUGAL-[*ú-tu* DÙ-*uš*]. For the transliteration of the passage, see Van der Spek 2003, 314.

61 The future tense might appear weird, considering that the text is essentially narrating past events, but the tense choice is explained by the fact that the tablet is technically supposed to be a miraculously accurate prophecy and not a narration of historical events.

62 *BM* 40623, col. v, l. 6: ^{lú}NUN-ʳ*ú*ˀ. The Akkadian term *rubû* usually designates a prince of royal blood, a remark which can be taken as a corroboration of Darius' ties to the Achaemenid dynasty. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that the word reflects more Darius' efforts to reinforce his dynastic legitimacy than his genuine family origins. However, generally speaking, there is no solid reason to dispute Darius' affiliation with the imperial dynasty.

63 The Hani were a semi-nomadic people living in the northern banks of the Euphrates river, usually under the authority of the Kingdom of Mari, during the 18th century B.C. Babylonian scribes subsequently used the expression anachronistically and in an intentionally archaic fashion to refer to the peoples coming to Mesopotamia from the west. In this case, the term corresponds to the Macedonians (Van der Spek 2003, 321).

64 The term *ša rēši* corresponds to court officials. What still remains ambiguous however is whether only eunuchs were concerned or not. Iconographic material, in the form of Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, shows beardless court officials, but they might have been adolescents or simply shaved adults. It has also been proposed that the meaning of the term gradually evolved from referring exclusively to castrated men to eventually encompassing court dignitaries in general, mutilated or not. Despite the attention this subject has acquired, there has been no unanimous conclusion yet (for example, see Oppenheim 1973, 332-334, Grayson 1995, 89-97, Watanabe 1999, 317-320, Siddal 2007, 232-237, Pirngruber 2011, 287-309 and Charles 2015, 292-293). In the case of the Achaemenid Empire, based on the ambiguity of the term *ša rēši* and the preponderance of eunuchs in the upper echelons of the imperial hierarchy, according to the Greek-Latin historiography, it has been proposed that the term *εὐνοῦχος*, similarly to *ša rēši*, is a general reference to court dignitaries and not just eunuchs (Briant 1996, 288). It is an interesting hypothesis, but it is not corroborated by the testimony of the Greek authors, who generally assumed that the officials in question were castrated. In the case of Bagoas, Diodorus explicitly mentions his corporal mutilation, in juxtaposition with his Machiavellian disposition (XVII, 5, 3: *εὐνοῦχος μὲν ὢν τὴν ἕξιν, πονηρὸς δὲ καὶ πολεμικὸς τὴν φύσιν*). On the close association of the name Bagoas with eunuchs in the classical literature of the Roman era, see Anagnostou-Laoutides, Charles 2018, 177-178. Overall, considering that there is no indication that the ancient Persians endorsed more modern prejudices about the allegedly harmful impact of the involvement of eunuchs in public affairs and that even in the works of the Classical period's authors, the role of the eunuchs in court politics can range from neutral to positive and negative (Lenfant 2014, 426-440), it is not necessary to suppose that Bagoas and the rest of his colleagues called eunuchs by the classical sources must not have been castrated (Lenfant 2012, 280-287).

65 Labat 1976, 329, Huehnergard 1997, 526, Black, George, Postgate (eds.) 2000, 403 and Reiner (ed.) 2006, 306-307.

domination[66], the Persian invasion under Cyrus II against the Babylonian kingdom of Nabonidus[67] and the Macedonian attack against Darius III himself[68]. Additionally, since the line about the prince's uprising follows directly that of the king's assassination by his dignitary, the text might give the impression that Darius revolted against Bagoas and not Arses. However, the order of the text is probably influenced by narrative factors (elimination of the old ruler and introduction of the new one), while any ambiguity could also serve to disassociate Darius, subsequently recognized as the legitimate monarch, from the regicide.

In any case, due to the silence of the available sources, we can only speculate about the details of the insurrection, but the answer might lie in the comment of Justin about Darius being the satrap of Armenia under Artaxerxes III and Arses. Armenia is situated very closely to the political center of the Achaemenid Empire in Mesopotamia and western Iran. Given that the country is also surrounded by mountains and is thus only with great difficulty accessible from outside, an ambitious satrap of Armenia could theoretically organise his military forces without being under constant surveillance from loyalist agents. The relative proximity of Armenia with the imperial residence of Arses, most probably the royal palace in Susa[69], in the region of Elam, in south-western Iran, could allow the seditious governor to strike quickly against his target, before the Great King had a chance to deploy his troops.

We therefore deduce that Darius actually played a much more active role than what Diodorus suggests, and that his rebellion, broken out probably in Armenia and relying on the military and economic resources of Darius as the satrap of the region, occurred almost simultaneously with the palatial intrigue that led to Arses' assassination. The exact relationship between the actions of Darius and Bagoas cannot be determined with absolute precision, although the likeliest scenario appears to be that of cooperation, albeit not necessarily cordial. However, it is clear that they both took advantage of the enfeebled position of the incumbent Great King. How can we then explain the weakness of Arses before the conspiracy, as well as his inability to confront the rebels and to guarantee the loyalty of his most highly positioned courtier?

Part of the answer lies in the limited duration of Arses' reign. Having ruled for approximately two years, his hold on power lasted more than those of the Great Kings that were overthrown almost immediately, like Bardiya (522 B.C.) and Xerxes II (425/424 B.C.), but it cannot be compared to the reigns of his father (Artaxerxes III - 20 years), grandfather (Artaxerxes II - 46 years), great-grandfather (Darius II - 20 years) and great-great-grandfather (Artaxerxes I - 41 years). It is therefore reasonable to assume that Arses may not have yet consolidated his imperial authority, while his relationship with his father's most esteemed officials, like Bagoas, who were not as attached politically to the new monarch as they were to Artaxerxes III, was especially fragile. His regime might have been further undermined by the outbreak of various disturbances in the imperial provinces that

66 *BM* 40623, col. i, l. 12-13.

67 *BM* 40623, col. ii, l. 17. On the contrary, to refer to the overthrow of Labashi-Marduk by Nabonidus, the scribe uses the verb *elû* (*BM* 40623, col. ii, l. 11).

68 *BM* 40623, col. v, l. 10.

69 One argument in favour of Susa relies on the date of Arses' death. An Aramaic contract (*WDSP* 1) discovered near Jericho and dated in the accession year of Darius III and the second year of an anonymous ruler (doubtlessly Arses) establishes the 18th March of 335 B.C. as the *terminus ante quem* (for an extensive commentary on the papyrus in question, see Gropp 2001, 33-44). Additionally, from the fact that Diodorus mentions (XVII, 5, 4) Arses being killed during his third regnal year and that Artaxerxes III died in September 338 B.C. [*BM* 71537, (rev.) col. iii, l. 9-10], we can surmise that the September of 336 B.C. is the *terminus post quem* for Arses' murder (Depuydt 2008, 41). Therefore, Arses was most probably murdered around the winter of 336/335 B.C. In the cold season, Susa was supposedly preferred by the Great Kings, due to its milder climate. However, the hypothesis of the seasonal migration of the royal court has been contested (for an overview of the issue, see Jacobs 2021, 1020-1022). In any case, the proximity of Armenia with the royal court would be true for every other royal capital (especially Ecbatana) and not just Susa.

weakened the political and military power of the Great King and provided the plotters with an invaluable distraction.

V. Trouble in the provinces?

As mentioned in the introduction, in regards to the political and military history of the Persian Empire under Arses, our knowledge is rather limited, due to the relative silence of the available sources. The only reference made by the classical literature concerns the outbreak of hostilities between the Persians and the Macedonians in north-western Asia Minor. In the spring of 336 B.C., Philip II sent the vanguard of the Macedonian army under the generals Parmenion, Amyntas and Attalus, in order to establish a bridgehead for the planned invasion against the Achaemenid Empire[70]. The Macedonians were confronted by Memnon, a Rhodian mercenary in Persian service, who succeeded in repulsing the invasion, which quickly devolved into a military stalemate[71]. So, there were military troubles in the north-western extremities of the Persian Empire, but it cannot be argued that the Macedonian expedition gravely destabilised Arses' authority. Parmenion and his colleagues even failed to secure the local satrapy of Hellespontine Phrygia, so they could not pose a threat to Arses serious enough to contribute significantly to the coup d'état orchestrated by Darius and Bagoas.

However, one cuneiform text alludes to a revolt potentially more menacing to Arses and geographically much closer to the heart of the Achaemenid Empire. The clay tablet in question is the *Uruk King List*, a catalogue of Mesopotamian rulers from Ashurbanipal (669-631 B.C.) to Seleucus II (246-226 B.C.). The passages regarding the middle and late Achaemenid monarchs are quite damaged, but, just before Darius III, the text mentions[72] a certain Nidin-Bêl, who is otherwise completely unknown. It has been suggested that Nidin-Bêl is the Babylonian name of Arses[73], but this hypothesis seems very unlikely, considering that absolutely no cuneiform text mentions Arses or any other Achaemenid Great King with that name[74]. Therefore, there is the possibility that Nidin-Bêl was a local rebel, who succeeded in wresting Mesopotamia from the Persians for some time[75].

Given the economic prosperity and demographic importance of relatively urbanised and well-irrigated Babylonia, even the temporary loss of this exceptionally wealthy satrapy, situated just next to Iran, could have irreparably damaged the political prestige and military strength of Arses, thus facilitating the revolt of Darius. However, the remark of the *Uruk King List* is historically dubious. As mentioned above, no other clay tablet mentions Nidin-Bêl and his uprising. The *argumentum a silentio* is not irrefutable, though, if we take into account the possibility that the rebellion of Nidin-Bêl was limited in scope and quickly quashed by the Persians.

However, what makes the historicity of the reference to Nidin-Bêl even more doubtful is his homonymy with Nidintu-Bêl. According to the *Behistun Inscription*[76], Nidintu-Bêl revolted against the Persians in 522 B.C., at the moment when Darius I (522-486 B.C.) overthrew his predecessor, Bardiya. In contrast to Nidin-Bêl, not only is the conflict between Nidintu-Bêl (who adopted the royal name Nebuchadnezzar III) and Darius described in a detailed manner in the *Behistun Inscription*, but his short-lived control of

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70 Diod. Sic. XVI, 91, 2, Just. *Epit*. IX, 5, 8 and Polyaenus, *Strat*. V, 44, 4-5.

71 For an analysis of the military operations, see Debord 1999, 421-426.

72 *IM* 65066 (rev.) l. 1: [*š*]*á* MU *šá-nu-ú* ^{m}*Nidin-*^{d}*B*[*êl*].

73 Van Dijk 1962, 60.

74 Oppenheim 1985, 533 and Stolper 1994, 240. On the contrary, in a clay tablet dated (*BM* 36613) to Alexander's or the Seleucids' era (Van der Spek 2003, 300-301), the Persian monarch in question is clearly named Arses (Aršu, in Akkadian).

75 Bosworth 1988, 34, Lane Fox 2007, 300 and Tolini 2011, 579.

76 *DB* § 16-20.

several Babylonian cities is also attested in several cuneiform tablets[77]. The fact that Nidintu-Bêl also fought against a Persian ruler named Darius strongly implies that his reign has most probably been misplaced by the scribe of the *Uruk King List*[78].

Consequently, although absolute certainty is not possible, considering the absence of any other reference to a Babylonian rebel between Arses and Darius, as well as the suspicious homonymy between the couples of Darius I/Nidintu-Bêl and Darius III/Nidin-Bêl, the likeliest scenario is that the comment of the *Uruk King List* is nothing but a scribal error and there was in fact no Babylonian revolt against Arses whatsoever. The fact that the *Uruk King List* was composed one century after Arses' reign and three centuries after Nidintu-Bêl's uprising might explain the scribe's lack of familiarity with the Mesopotamian history of the Achaemenid era.

However, although the hostilities in Asia Minor were of peripheral importance and Mesopotamia most probably remained calm during the reign of Arses, the situation was remarkably more chaotic in Egypt. The principal source for this period of Egyptian history is the *Satrap's Stela*, a decree of Ptolemy I (though still recognising Alexander IV as the nominal ruler of the country) describing the renewal of a royal donation to the Egyptian temple of Buto in the Nile Delta. The hieroglyphic text also mentions the benefaction to the temple of a native Pharaoh, named Khababash. Khababash confronted Hšryš, a Persian ruler presented in a very negative manner in the inscription, whom, together with his son, Khababash eventually evicted from his palace[79].

The *Satrap's Stela* is clearly referring to an Egyptian rebel leader, who managed to temporarily disrupt the Persian authority over the Nile valley, but provides no historical context whatsoever. The identity of Hšryš is particularly mysterious. His name is the Egyptian version of the Persian name Xšayaršā or Xerxes in Greek[80]. However, based on secondary attestations of Khababash' name in demotic texts[81], it is unanimously concluded that his revolt should be dated to the second occupation of Egypt by the Persians, between 341 and 332 B.C[82]. Moreover, from the Apis sarcophagus with Khababash' name inscribed on it, it can be deduced with increased confidence that the rebellion of Khababash most probably lasted between the winter of 338/337 and the winter of 336/335 B.C.[83]. During that time Khababash succeeded in controlling a significant part of the Nile Delta and even Middle and Lower Egypt, albeit not necessarily simultaneously[84]. Therefore, Hšryš may stand either for Artaxerxes III[85] or for a generic reference to the Achaemenid monarchy, in

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77 For a list of the cuneiform tablets dated during the reign of Nidintu-Bêl/Nebuchadnezzar III, see Lorenz 2008, 31-35. Nidintu-Bêl was recognized as king in Babylon, Sippar, Borsippa, Kutha, Uruk and maybe in Dilbat, Ur and Larsa as well (Lorenz 2008, 87-88).

78 Kuhrt 1987, 148-149. Safaee 2017, 51-54 argues however that, since several rebels adopted more illustrious names that alluded to past rulers, in order to increase their legitimacy, the Babylonian rebel of the 4th century B.C. may have followed the same practice, associating himself with Nidintu-Bêl. However, Nidintu-Bêl himself changed his name to Nebuchadnezzar, as did Arakha the Armenian, who revolted a few months later. So, there was no solid reason for the hypothetical rebel against Darius III to adopt a name that the ancient rebel had actually abandoned for something more prestigious. On the contrary, it is more probable that the alleged rebel would have also named himself Nebuchadnezzar, in imitation of Nidintu-Bêl and Arakha.

79 *Urk*. II, 18. 4-5: *wḏí.n.f ḥfty Hšryš m śbḫt.f*.

80 Lloyd 1982, 176, Devauchelle 1995a, 77 and Ladynin 2005, 99.

81 For a summary list of the evidence in question, see Devauchelle 1995b, 40-42.

82 The most conclusive confirmation for the dating of Khababash' reign comes from a marriage contract signed in the reign of Khababash (*Papyrus Libbey*). The scribe (Peteharpres, son of Pekaas) is also attested in documents dated during the reign of Alexander III, from 330 to 324 B.C. Therefore, Khababash could have only rebelled between the conquest of Artaxerxes III and the reign of Darius III, as any other alternative is chronologically untenable (Spiegelberg 1907, 3-4).

83 Kienitz 1953, 187, Burstein 2000, 150-151 and Wojciechowska 2016, 19-20.

84 Wojciechowska 2016, 20. As for Arses, his name is only preserved on the shard of a clay jar of unknown provenance (Devauchelle 1995b, 40), which could however confirm that the Persian monarch's authority was recognized in at least some parts of Egypt.

85 Cf. Spiegelberg 1907, 5-6, Spalinger 1978, 151-152, Goedicke 1985, 39 and Ladynin 2005, 112. If Hšryš is identified with Artaxerxes III or Arses and if the sentence of the *Satrap's Stela* about him being evicted from

general[86].

To recapitulate, although we lack a detailed description of Khababash' rebellion against the Persians, the available evidence strongly indicates that Khababash rebelled during the winter of 338/337 B.C., in the eve of Arses' reign, and managed to control large parts of the country for approximately two years. His authority in Egypt was essentially parallel to that of Arses in the Achaemenid Empire, which suggests that Khababash was most probably the gravest geopolitical concern for the Persian monarch. Not only were large swathes of the country lost to the rebels, but Pherendates, the satrap of Egypt appointed by Artaxerxes III[87], disappears from the historical record and is replaced by the satrap Sabaces during Alexander's campaign[88], thus indicating a serious disturbance of the imperial administration in Egypt.

Egypt also possessed an immense financial and strategic value. It was an exceptionally prosperous region, whose control not only greatly benefited the imperial treasury, but also secured the hegemony of the Achaemenid Empire in the eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, Egypt was also remarkably easy to defend[89]. Even if the eastern invaders succeeded in crossing the arid Sinai Peninsula without logistical issues and without being harassed by the potentially hostile Bedouin tribes, their advance could still be delayed by the Egyptian defenders taking advantage of the irrigation infrastructure of the Nile to flood the river banks and the surrounding regions. It is thus very probable that a significant portion of Arses' military and economic resources was dedicated to the reconquest of Egypt, which however rendered the Great King more vulnerable to military coups. Therefore, although Khababash' revolt was not the primary factor for the outbreak of Darius' rebellion, the destabilisation his rebellion caused in Egypt, together with the efforts made, in order to restore the Persian suzerainty, may have crucially facilitated the rebellion of Darius and the conspiracy of Bagoas against Arses, whose fragile and weakened authority made him a relatively easy target.

VI. Conclusion

To sum up, the Greek-Latin historiography, in this case mainly represented by Diodorus' *Historical Library*, generally remains our basic source of information for the empire's political and military history. However, cuneiform tablets, hieroglyphic inscriptions and Aramaic papyri not only help us fill the gaps of the events not mentioned by the Greek historians, but they also provide us with a more elaborate image of the dynastic transitions and political evolution in the Persian Empire. In the specific example of Arses, the cuneiform texts of astronomical and divinatory tablets allow us to examine the most controversial segments of Diodorus' account with a more critical mind and to reassess the role and the impact of the two protagonists, Darius and Bagoas, during the coup against

his palace together with his son is considered a euphemism for the assassination of the monarch (Spiegelberg 1907, 5-6 and Roeder 1959, 104), then it could be argued that the *Satrap's Stela* corroborates Diodorus' account about the circumstances of Artaxerxes' and Arses' fall from power (cf. Olmstead 1948, 492, Goedicke 1985, 41-42 and Ruzicka 2012, 202). However, the text is simply alluding to the expulsion of the Persian troops, represented metonymically by Hšryš, without any reference to Persian internal affairs (Spalinger 1978, 151, Briant 1996, 1044 and Ladynin 2005, 94).

86 Briant 1996, 1044 and Gorre 2017, 60.

87 Diod. Sic. XVI, 51, 3.

88 Arr. *Anab*. II, 11, 8 and Curt. III, 11, 10; IV, 1, 28. Diodorus calls him Tasiaces (XVII, 34, 5: *Ταsιάκης*), but he is without doubt the same person, as Diodorus' hellenisations of Persian names often differ from those of other Greek-Roman authors.

89 Kahn, Tammuz 2009, 42-43 and Ruzicka 2012, 15. It is not a coincidence that Egypt has been essentially the only satrapy of the Persian Empire to have rebelled successfully and to have managed to maintain its independence for several generations. The logistical difficulties of campaigning in Egypt are illustrated in a rather detailed manner in Diodorus' account about the failed expeditions of Perdiccas (XVIII, 33, 2 – 36, 5) and Antigonus the One-Eyed against Ptolemy I (XX, 73-76) during the Wars of the Diadochi.

Arses. Similarly, the demotic and hieroglyphic sources from Egypt offer a more complete picture of the challenges Arses faced during his reign, which partly explain his fall from power.

Of course, neither the Babylonian nor the Egyptian sources are impeccable, as they also suffer from lack of precision, partiality and even clerical mistakes, like in the case of the *Uruk King List*. However, the critical examination and juxtaposition of the different sources permit a more profound understanding of the rise and fall of Arses, whose interpretation would have otherwise been particularly puzzling, had we relied exclusively on Diodorus' problematic testimony.

To recapitulate, the assassination of Artaxerxes III by Bagoas, described in a rather literary and stereotypical manner by Diodorus and Aelian, most probably never occurred. On the contrary, Arses peacefully succeeded his father, who died from natural causes. However, the reign of the new Great King was far from serene. Although Mesopotamia remained calm and the troubles in north-western Asia Minor were of marginal importance, the uprising of Khababash in Egypt shortly after the death of Artaxerxes III[90] seriously disrupted the hegemony of the Achaemenid Empire in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, while also stretching the political and military resources of the Persian monarch. In addition to provincial unrest, Arses also faced opposition inside the imperial court from highly placed officials, like Bagoas, who had enjoyed great honours during the reign of Artaxerxes, but who may have felt sidelined under the rule of his son.

These difficulties eventually culminated into the revolt of the satrap of Armenia and the conspiracy of Bagoas, which led to the overthrow of Arses and the ascension to the throne of Darius III. However, the coexistence between Darius and Bagoas did not last for long, although we can only speculate about the reasons for the friction between the two, as the explanation cited by Diodorus[91] is founded upon the repetitive and historically doubtful pattern of the royal puppet outsmarting and poisoning his master[92]. There is of course the possibility they had actually never been allies, especially if we accept the hypothesis that the *Dynastic Prophecy* indicates that Darius revolted in reaction to Bagoas' coup and not against Arses.

However, it is interesting to note that the quarrels between Great Kings that obtained the imperial crown through violent means and their former accomplices are a frequent phenomenon in Persian history. Darius I summarily executed Intaphernes[93], one of his six allies in the coup against Bardiya[94], as well as the loyalist commander of the troops sent to quell the revolt of Arakha/Nabuchodonosor IV in 521 B.C.[95]. Darius I's grandson, Artaxerxes I eliminated[96] his chiliarch Artapanus, whose involvement had been

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90 The concurrence of Khababash' revolt with the death of Artaxerxes III is probably not a coincidence. Dynastic upheavals, even if they did not devolve into outright civil wars, could provide a valuable opportunity for secessionist movements, whose centrifugal tendencies had stronger chances of success under a new, inexperienced and politically weak monarch than under the rule of a Great King, who had already consolidated his authority. The most typical example of the aforementioned phenomenon is the so-called Behistun crisis, when the revolt and subsequent overthrow of Bardiya sparked a huge wave of separatist rebellions from Margiana in the north-east to Egypt in the south-west (*DB* § 21). Of course, the provincial revolts themselves could destabilise even further the authority of the Great King, thus encouraging even more dynastic disputes, in a vicious circle schema that could pose a significant challenge to the Persian monarchy.

91 Diod. Sic. XVII, 5, 6.

92 Bagoas is not the only conspirator to have supposedly died from his own poison. The Seleucid ruler Antiochus VIII foiled the assassination plot of Cleopatra Thea, his own mother, by forcing her to drink from the same poisoned cup she had earlier offered him (App. *Syr*. 69 and Just. *Epit*. XXXIX, 2, 7-8).

93 Hdt. III, 118 – 119.

94 *DB* § 68. Herodotus' list of Darius' allies (III, 70, 2), albeit not impeccable, also includes Intaphernes.

95 *DB* § 49-51.

96 Ctes. Fr. 14 § 34, Diod. Sic. XI, 9 and Just. *Epit*. III, 1. The similarities between Artapanus and Bagoas are not limited to the chiliarchy. Similarly to the posthumous reputation of Bagoas as a nefarious regicide, Artapanus is also blamed for the murder of Xerxes and his firstborn son, thus completely absolving Artaxerxes I from any responsibility for the bloody coup d'état (Wiesehöfer 2007, 5-7).

instrumental in the murder of Xerxes I and Darius, the heir apparent. Additionally, Sogdianus ordered the official Bagorazus to be stoned to death[97], despite the latter having helped Sogdianus to usurp the imperial throne from Xerxes II. Finally, Artoxares, one of the most powerful officials of Darius II and his ally in the struggle against Sogdianus[98], was executed under the orders of Darius II, following the revelation of a plot orchestrated by Artoxares against the Great King[99].

The aforementioned examples strongly suggest that conspiratorial coalitions were prone to fragmentation, once the common goal that encouraged them to coalesce in the first place, the overthrow of the incumbent monarch, was achieved. In any case, the elimination of Arses, Khababash and eventually Bagoas allowed Darius to consolidate his hold on power, without facing any grave, domestic opposition. The stability lasted only for a few years, though, until the Macedonian invasion, which provoked a long series of tactical defeats and desertions, ultimately leading to the coup d'état of Bessus and the overthrow and death of Darius himself[100].

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97 Ctes. Fr. 15 § 49.

98 Ctes. Fr. 15 § 50-51.

99 Ctes. Fr. 15 § 54.

100 Arr. *Anab*. III, 21, Curt. V, 8-13, Diod. Sic. XVII, 73, 2-4, Just. *Epit*. XI, 15 and Plut. *Vit*. *Alex*. 42, 5 – 43, 4.

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