



ARISTAGORAS

ARISTAGORAS, son of Molpagoras, tyrant of Miletus (late 6th-early 5th centuries B.C.). The Greek tradition for the most part goes back to Herodotus and is decidedly unfavorable to Aristagoras. Herodotus presents him as a negative character and reduces major historical events to the level of Aristagoras's personal motivations. Some modern scholars have followed, some have rejected this presentation, but in neither case have they done Aristagoras justice.

Any interpretation must be based on critical examination of Herodotus's evidence. Aristagoras was tyrant of Miletus, *epitropos* in place of his cousin Histiaeus, who was detained at Susa by Darius I. In 500 he received an embassy of Naxian exiles and, with the aim of aiding them to return to their homeland, took part in a large-scale naval expedition against the island of Naxos in the spring of 499 B.C. The expedition was supported by Artaphernes, satrap of Sardis, and approved by Darius. When the attempt failed, Aristagoras, realizing the desirability of concentrating ships in the waters near Miletus, profited from the increasing discontent of the Greek population of western Asia. Abandoning his tyranny in Miletus, he put himself at the head of an insurrection in the second half of 499 B.C. The origins of the movement were economic and political, and it aimed at the overthrow of local tyrants and liberation from royal overlordship. Aristagoras tried, with little success, to include the mainland Greeks in this crusade of the Greeks of Asia. The naval aid of Athens and Eretria was modest when compared with the forces other warring powers put in the field. Aristagoras, though he remained at Miletus,



was the driving force behind an expedition in 498 against Sardis, seat of the satrap. During the attack the city was devastated by fire, and the temple of Cybele destroyed. The attackers withdrew without achieving any significant military success. After the defeat of Ephesus the Athenian contingents retired from the struggle, despite Aristagoras's insistent invitation to them to return.

In Asia Minor the revolt became more threatening as it spread to the Hellespont, Propontis, part of Caria, and Cyprus. The Persian counteroffensive was slow and not uniformly successful, but in the long run inexorable. Faced with the advance of the Persian forces, Aristagoras's situation became more and more difficult both at home and abroad. In the second half of 497 he set out for Thrace to found a colony at Myrcinus, but was treacherously killed by the Thracians during a siege. With Aristagoras gone, the revolt went on, though it was hopeless for the rebels; at the end of 494 Miletus was taken and destroyed, and in 493 the last centers of resistance were wiped out.

These are, in outline, the main events in which Aristagoras was involved. The deeper significance of his role in history is more difficult to reconstruct. Certain qualities can hardly be denied him—his sense of the military potential of Sparta and Athens, of the economic and strategic importance of the Thracian region in the overall conduct of the war, and the ability he showed in the military attack on Sardis, which was perhaps an attempt to detach the Lydians from the Persian cause. It is certain that Aristagoras' role in the revolt was in no way subordinate to that of Histiaeus, though this is implied both by Herodotus at certain points of his *History* and, in particular, by later Greek tradition, when it insists on the proverbial expression, "Histiaeus stitched this shoe, and Aristagoras put it on," or on the stratagem of the messenger from Histiaeus on whose head was written the order for Aristagoras to rebel.

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