



## BESSOS

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**BESSOS**, satrap of Bactria and last Achaemenid king (ca. 336-329 b.c.). His career as described by Greco-Roman historians of Alexander's conquest of Iran is one of moral turpitude. A member of the ruling Achaemenid house (Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.21.5, 3.30.4), Bessos was appointed satrap (governor) of the important province of Bactria (modern Afghanistan and adjoining areas; Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.8.3, 3.21.1; Quintus Curtius, 5.8.5, 5.9.8; Diodorus, 17.73.4) by the king of kings Darius III, ca. 336 b.c. (Diodorus, 17.74.1; cf. Arrian, 3.30.4; perhaps to replace an earlier supporter of the recently executed vizier Bagoas, cf. Diodorus, 16.50.8, 17.5.3-6).

From his capital at Bactra (Zariaspa), in the area of modern Balkh, Bessos exercised control over Bactria, Sogdia to the north, and border regions of India (Arrian, 3.8.3). He kept the nomadic Iranian Sakai of Central Asia (including the Dahai and Massagetai) loyal to the empire (Arrian, 3.8.3, cf. 3.11.3 with Quintus Curtius, 4.11.6-7; Quintus Curtius, 7.4.6, shows an overly optimistic view of Bessos' sphere of influence). From these peoples Bessos and his subordinate officers (nobility controlling fortified high places) mustered troops for the defense of the Achaemenid empire against Alexander at Gaugamela, 331 b.c. (Arrian, 3.8, 11, 13; Quintus Curtius, 4.6, 8, 15). Following the Macedonian victory, Bessos accompanied Darius in his flight to Ecbatana (Quintus Curtius, 5.8; Arrian, 3.16.1, 3.19.1; Diodorus, 17.73).

Darius, deemed unworthy of kingship because of constant losses to Macedonian invaders, was arrested in mid-330 by Nabarzanes the vizier, Barsaëntes, satrap of Arachosia-Drangiana, and Bessos, who was named



hegemon of Achaemenid forces (on the motivation for the arrest Quintus Curtius, 5.9.4-8, cf. 6.4.9, is more believable than Arrian, 3.21.5, 3.30.4; on the arrest see Arrian, 3.21.1-5, 3.23.4; Quintus Curtius, 5.12.4; the names of the murderers of Darius are given in the *Šāh-nāma* as Jānūspār and Māhyār; see Wolff, *Glossar*, s.vv.). When Macedonian troops approached in “rescue,” Darius was executed (Arrian, 3.21.10; Quintus Curtius, 5.12.16-17; Diodorus, 17.73; Justin, 11.15).

At Bactra, in the autumn of 330, Bessos donned royal robes and upright tiara, and assumed the royal name Artaxerxes V, king of unoccupied eastern Iran and Central Asia (Arrian, 3.25.3; Diodorus, 17.74.1-2, 83.3; Quintus Curtius, 6.6.13-14). Support for the new king, although widespread geographically (and due, in part, to his tenure as satrap), was sporadic in duration, being inversely proportional to the approach and presence of Macedonian forces. His sphere included Bactria, the new center of empire; Sogdia, controlled by lesser officers including Spitamenes of Samarqand and Oxyartes (Arrian, 3.28); nomadic Iranian peoples of Central Asia (Arrian, 3.25, 28; Quintus Curtius, 6.6.13-14); Areia (Herat), lead by the satrap Satibarzanes, who initially surrendered to Alexander, then killed the occupation forces, and led the province until his death in combat, 329 b.c. (Arrian, 3.25, 28; Quintus Curtius, 6.6.13-22, 7.3.2, 7.4.32-40; Diodorus, 17.78, 81, 83); Arachosia-Drangiana (Qandahār-Sīstān), under the satrap Barsaēntes, who eventually fled to India (Arrian, 3.25; Quintus Curtius, 8.13.3-4; Diodorus, 17.74); western India (Arrian, 4.30.4; Quintus Curtius, 8.13.4); Parthia, temporarily led by Bessos’ appointee as satrap, the former vizier Nabarazanes (cf. Arrian, 4.7.1; and Heckel, 1981).

The unified resistance effort collapsed when Bessos, upon Alexander’s successful invasion of Bactria through the Paropamisadai in spring 329 (Arrian, 3.28-29; Quintus Curtius, 7.3.19-23, 7.4.22-25), decided to withdraw across the Oxus River into Sogdia (Arrian, 3.28.8-10; Quintus Curtius, 7.4.1-21). Bactra, Bessos’ imperial capital, fell (Arrian, 3.29.1; Quintus Curtius, 7.4.26-31, 7.5.1.). Disenchanted lesser officers, led by Spitamenes, seized Bessos, himself now proven unworthy of kingship, and handed him over to the Macedonians for eventual execution (Arrian, 3.28-30, 4.7.3; Quintus Curtius, 7.5.19-40, 7.6.13; Diodorus, 17.83.7-9).



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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