



## DARIUS V. DARIUS III

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Darius III (b. ca. 380 B.C.E., d. mid-330; cf. Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.22.6), the last Achaemenid king.

*Sources.* The lack of sources for the last century of Achaemenid rule (Frye, p. 135) is especially severe for the life and reign of Darius III. There are no Persian royal texts or monuments, and what is known comes almost solely from the Greek historians, who depicted his career mainly as a contrast to the brilliant first few years of [Alexander the Great](#). There are a few documents from Babylonia, including the Uruk king list; an astronomical diary that has been interpreted as giving the date of the battle of Gaugamela and of Alexander's entry into Babylon (20 October 331); and some astronomical observations collected by Abraham Sachs, in which Darius' personal name, not mentioned elsewhere, is given in two slightly different transcriptions (cf. Stolper, *CAH*<sup>2</sup>, with additional references). The main literary sources, all written centuries after Darius' reign, are the Greek accounts of Alexander's career and their derivatives: the universal history of [Diodorus Siculus](#) (bk. 17; 1st century B.C.E.); Arrian's *Anabasis* (2nd century C.E., drawing chiefly on two contemporary accounts) and, in Latin, [Curtius Rufus](#) (probably 1st century C.E.; cf. Rutz), both chiefly based on a romanticized contemporary account by [Cleitarchus](#); Plutarch, *Alexander* and some references in the *Moralia* (based on a great variety of sources of variable value; ca. 100 C.E.); and Justin's 3rd-



century epitome of Pompeius Trogus' world history (in Latin, based on Greek sources; 1st century B.C.E.). The only useful monumental source is the Alexander mosaic from Pompeii.

*Darius' life.* Even in antiquity Darius' origin was obscure (see especially Diodorus, 17.5.5-6; Justin, 10.3.3-6; Plutarch, *Moralia* 326F; Strabo, 15.3.24). Furthermore, his life before his accession has received no detailed treatment in modern scholarly literature. He seems to have had some connection with the royal family but probably not a close one. In the Greek tradition he was unanimously depicted as an outsider who had risen to the throne through outstanding bravery, first shown in single combat in an early expedition of [Artaxerxes III Ochus](#) (359-38 B.C.E.) against the [Cadusii](#). Justin, who gave the fullest account, reported that, although Darius had been an obscure figure (*quidam*) before, he was rewarded for his valor with the satrapy of Armenia and later became king; according to both Diodorus and Strabo, the Achaemenid dynasty had ended with his predecessor, Arses (338-36 B.C.E.). Diodorus also included the Cadusian story but in his introduction called Darius a son of "Arsanes" (i.e., Arsames, OPers. [Aršāma](#), the name of the grandfather of Darius I; see iii, above) and grandson of Ostanes, a son of Darius II (424-05; see iv, above). This lineage was clearly the official version, probably adopted, along with the throne name Darius (cf. Dandamaev, p. 112 n. 3), at his accession. In Babylonian documents his personal name appears as Ar-ta-šá-a-ta/u (probably OPers. \*Artašiyāta, lit, "happy in Arta"). Of the Greeks only Justin, who was generally well informed about names and must be accepted as reproducing the Greek tradition, mentioned a personal name, Codomannus, which Darius bore before gaining prominence. The name of his mother (by birth or adoption) appears as Sisyngambris (Diodorus) or Sisigambis (Curtius, with numerous manuscript variants). Curtius, in a rhetorical passage (10.5.23), seems to have identified her as a cousin of Ochus, who eliminated a brother of Ostanes with all his sons on his accession. She cannot have been a full cousin, however, for Ochus would not then have spared Darius' life, let alone promoting him. Darius had a brother Oxyathres (whether a full or "official" brother is unknown), who fought loyally for him and was held in honor by Alexander after Darius' death.

At some unspecified time Darius was probably in charge of the royal "postal service," an exalted position, perhaps the same one that is ascribed to the great Parnaka in the Persepolis Fortification tablets. Plutarch (*Moralia* 326F) called him both a "courier" (using the Persian loanword *astándes*) and a slave (as in



other sources); he was thus presumably the king's *bandaka* (see [BANDA i](#)) in the public service. After the succession of [Arses](#) he was one of the king's "friends" at court, and it may be at that time that he was promoted from his satrapy to the postal service; he may in fact already have been elevated by his old patron Ochus, perhaps about 340, when he seems to have married the royal princess Stateira, whom Curtius described as his sister or cousin; his only son by her, Ochus, was six years old when captured by Alexander late in 333. Three daughters by an earlier wife are attested, one married to a Mithridates who died fighting on the Granicus (see below), and two who as adolescents accompanied their father on the campaign that ended in the battle of Issus and were captured along with his mother, wife, and son. One unreliable source reported that he also had another son, Ariobarzanes, whom he had executed for treason.

When the general [Bagōas](#) murdered Arses and his sons he installed Darius as king, no doubt because (as reported in the Greek sources) his reputation for valor made him acceptable to the nobles; Darius' probable connection with the royal family and the memory of Artaxerxes Ochus' favor must also have contributed to their acceptance. Bagōas must have thought that the outsider would have to rely on him, but Darius soon eliminated him and assumed full control, at about the time that Alexander the Great succeeded in Macedonia (autumn 336). Darius may have been faced with immediate rebellions in Egypt (see Kienitz, pp. 110, 185 ff., though the chronology and interpretation are unclear) and Babylon; a native king was briefly in occupation of Memphis at about that time, and in the Uruk king list a king with a Babylonian name appears just before Darius. These rebellions cannot have been of major importance, however, as both pretenders quickly disappeared from the record, evidence that their revolts were quickly suppressed; nevertheless, they must have added to Darius' feeling of insecurity.

This insecurity, together with a deceptively easy success against an expedition sent by Philip II into Asia Minor, dissuaded him from strengthening his forces in the west, despite Alexander's preparations for resuming the invasion (cf. [Dandamaev](#), pp. 314-19). He did not establish there a unified command comparable to that of the Rhodian Greek Mentor under Ochus. Mentor's brother Memnon was perhaps the only man who could have handled such a command, but, as a brother-in-law of [Artabazus](#), satrap of Phrygia, he had joined in the latter's rebellion against Ochus and long exile in Macedonia. Other commanders, mainly eminent Persians and some even members of the



royal family, were unacceptable to a king of doubtful legitimacy who feared their power. Thus, when Alexander invaded Asia Minor early in 334, he was met at the river Granicus by only a small force, divided among several commanders with different strategic ideas. A strike at Alexander himself failed, and after his victory the whole of Asia Minor lay open before him, with the exception of one or two fortified and garrisoned cities, which he at first bypassed, then conquered.

It was only after receiving Memnon's wife and children as hostages that Darius named him "commander of the seashore and the fleet" (the position once held by Cyrus the Younger; see [CYRUS vi](#)). Even then, some troops were actually recalled from the coast, for Darius had decided to meet the invader in person, in a land battle. Memnon was given a free hand only at sea, but Alexander had dismissed his own fleet through fear of Greek disloyalty. Memnon launched a successful counteroffensive, intending to recapture the main island bases and then to carry the war to Greece, where Agis III of Sparta was eager to lead an alliance to overthrow Macedonian domination. But Memnon died, and his successors were less capable. By the time they met Agis off the Greek coast, Darius had been defeated at Issus (in late 333). Agis was given some funds and, after collecting mercenaries, launched his war in Greece, but by then he could receive no further support. Early in 330 he was defeated and killed. Darius himself died soon afterward.

During 334-33 Darius collected an army with unprecedented speed, and by October 333 he was crossing the Taurus mountains; through a failure in Alexander's intelligence, he was able to appear at his rear. But he lacked experience of major command and, persuaded by his advisers that victory was certain, he faced Alexander on the small coastal plain of Issus, where his superior cavalry could not be deployed to envelop the enemy's left. Parmenio, the most experienced Macedonian commander, held it back while Alexander routed the king. For the Persians the battle was a disaster. Darius himself escaped before it was over, and Greek historians were quick to charge him with cowardice—though bravery was his best-attested quality. It is more probable that he had kept his head and had understood that the only chance of saving the kingdom lay in saving himself; had he died, there was no plausible successor who could command allegiance and lead resistance to the invasion.

His family had fallen into Alexander's hands, however. There is no reason to disbelieve the stories of his anxiety over their treatment and his surprise at Alexander's magnanimity. Nonetheless, that they were hostages dissuaded



Darius from attempting a counterattack. While Persia's allies confidently waited for him to do so (the city of Tyre holding out for nearly a year against all Alexander's siegecraft), the king began negotiations for a settlement. The details cannot be recovered, for the documents quoted in Greek sources are as usual fictitious, but it is clear that he faced decisions inconceivable to his predecessors. The minimum terms that offered hope of acceptance were cession of large territories and recognition of Alexander as an equal. In addition, Darius offered a large ransom for his family and a marriage alliance to seal the bargain. It is said that Parmenio advised Alexander to accept, but, quite apart from Alexander's heroic ambition, he could not easily do so. Once peace had been made and the hostages released, he would have to return home, leaving garrisons to guard a long frontier; Darius would then be free to attack at a time of his own choosing. Alexander therefore decided instead to seize his chance of inflicting further humiliation. He rejected all terms and demanded that Darius pay homage to him as his superior. Darius thus had no choice but to fight on.

He had few Greek mercenaries left to form a usable infantry force, but he decided to improve the equipment of his native forces after the Greek model; his cavalry was vastly superior, and he had both elephants (which the enemy had never seen) and the fearsome scythe chariots used by Cyrus the Younger at [Cunaxa](#). Furthermore, this time he would be fighting on his own ground. He seems to have awaited Alexander in Mesopotamia and to have offered no opposition when the Greek forces crossed the desert and the Euphrates. But Alexander, probably by chance, traveled farther north to avoid the extreme heat, crossing both the Euphrates and the Tigris. Darius thus had to find suitable ground east of the Tigris; he took a position near the village of Gaugamela north of [Arbela](#), with the Maqlūb ridge covering his flank. The plain was large enough for his cavalry, and he had it leveled in order to allow full use of the chariots. But with the decision to await the enemy's attack he had lost the initiative. Alexander moved up slowly, allowing his men to rest while keeping Darius on the alert. He halted overlooking the edge of the plain; the moon was in its last quarter, and in a night attack the disciplined Macedonians would have overwhelmed the motley Iranian forces. Darius thus kept his men under arms all night, while Alexander allowed his troops to rest, then attacked at sunrise, on 1 October 331. As at [Cunaxa](#), the chariots proved useless against disciplined forces, and, despite his improved equipment, Darius had nothing to set against the Greek phalanx. The cavalry, as planned, fought successfully against Alexander's left, commanded by Parmenio, but



Alexander, who was on the right, ignored the threat of encirclement, let the Persians pour through a gap in his center, then charged straight at the weary troops in Darius's center, where the king himself commanded (Figure 1). The line was broken, and Darius again had to flee. His army disintegrated, and Alexander never again had to face the grand Persian army in full-scale battle.

Darius fled to [Ecbatana](#), hoping either to draw Alexander after him or to gain time while Alexander occupied the other royal capitals. Alexander took the latter course, occupying Babylon (where his army rested for a month) and Susa without opposition and continuing on to Persepolis. En route, at the so-called "Persian Gate," [Ariobarzanes](#), commander of Persis, caught Alexander in a trap and inflicted on him the only defeat he is attested to have suffered at Persian hands. Nevertheless, Alexander found a way of going around the narrow pass to Ariobarzanes' rear and avenged his defeat; in mid-January 330 he reached Persepolis and destroyed the lower city. He remained there four months, except for a limited campaign to occupy the rest of Persis, including Pasargadae, while he waited for news of Agis' war in Greece. Having heard nothing by May, he destroyed the terrace and royal buildings at Persepolis, in a symbolic gesture of revenge for Xerxes' destruction in Greece, and set out on the mountain road to Ecbatana. The Greek sources do not provide information on how Darius used the time he had gained at such cost. There is no sign that he assembled another army, either at Ecbatana or farther east, and such a task was probably impossible in winter. When Alexander approached he left him to occupy the city and, with a few remaining nobles and a small force, retreated eastward. Alexander organized Media and slowly followed him, until he heard that Darius had been taken prisoner by his own companions.

The surviving account of Darius' last days is ultimately based on unreliable sources: Darius' Greek mercenaries, who were loyal to the end but had little idea of what was going on, and Persian nobles who later joined Alexander and were unlikely to tell the whole truth. The lead in the plot against Darius was said to have been taken by [Bessos](#), satrap of Bactria, who was related to the royal family and may have had as valid a claim to the Persian throne as the king himself. Bessos is contradictorily reported to have been ambitious for the royal dignity and to have hoped to buy his own safety by surrendering Darius. He and several others, including the *hazārapati*- ([chiliarch](#)) Nabarzanes, bound the king in golden fetters. When Alexander heard of this development from Persian deserters, he hastened to take the king alive, but by the time he arrived, somewhere near Hecatompylus, it was too late. The conspirators,



fearing capture, had stabbed Darius and left him to die while they escaped to the east. Bessos then assumed the royal tiara and the throne name Artaxerxes. In later fiction the two rulers met, and Darius uttered a great speech of proud resignation before dying.

It is possible only to guess the realities that lay behind these events, but Alexander's eagerness to reach Darius while he was alive and the conspirators' determination to prevent this meeting and to carry on the war in the east suggest that Darius was ready to do what Alexander had demanded two years earlier: to pay homage to him as a superior and thus to confer some legitimacy on his attempt to assume the Achaemenid succession. Some eminent nobles had joined Alexander after the battle at Gaugamela and had been rewarded with satrapies and honors, but the destruction of Persepolis had largely undone the effect of Alexander's striving for legitimacy. Only recognition by Darius might yet have spared him years of war in the east, which did in fact ensue. Darius' motives are less clear. Several instances in which he put personal honor below his country's interests have been mentioned. Despair for the present and desire to spare Persia further suffering may have been mingled with hope for future recovery. The young "barbarian" might not have been able to hold what he had won, and another chance might have come for Darius. His death was a misfortune for both sides but a disaster for Persia.

Alexander sent Darius' body to be buried "among the royal tombs"; it is not clear where they were, but he cannot have been placed in the unfinished tomb at Persepolis. His monument, if he had one, does not survive, any more than does that of Alexander.

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