



GAUMĀTA

GAUMĀTA, according to the Bisotūn inscriptions (q.v.), the Magian pretender who seized the Achaemenid throne by claiming to be Bardiya (Smerdis), the son of Cyrus the Great (qq.v.). No event has been more abundantly documented and more bitterly discussed in the rich history of the Achaemenids than the transition of power from Cambyses (Kambūjiya) to Darius I (522 B.C.E., qq.v.). Shortly after his accession to the throne and his great victories, Darius had the official version inscribed on the rock of Bisotūn in three languages (Elamite, Old Persian, and Babylonian) and diffused in all the languages of the empire (an incomplete Aramaic version has been found in the back of a papyrus from the Egyptian island of Elephantine [q.v.], dated to Darius II). According to Darius (DB 1.26-61), Cambyses has had his half brother Bardiya assassinated and kept it secret. When Cambyses embarked on his Egyptian expedition (525 B.C.E.), the rebellion (*drauga-*, lit: the lie) grew “in Persia, Media, and other countries”; it was in these circumstances that a man (*martiya-*), referred to in the inscriptions as a Magian (*magu-*) by the name of Gaumāta plotted a coup d’état in Persia and claimed to be Bardiya, Cyrus’s son and Cambyses’ brother. Having found quite a number of supporters, he seized royal power (*xšaça-*) and when Cambyses died in July 522 B.C.E., he continued his reign without much opposition (DB 1.26-60). Apart from some still debated military and topographical problems (Koch, pp. 49-60), it is the now famous and much discussed paragraph 14 (ll. 61-70) that poses arduous problems. There, Darius accuses the usurper of having upset the equilibrium of the society and the kingdom by destroying the sanctuaries and confiscating from the *kāra-* (people? army? nobles? see below), pastures, herds, workers, and



houses/domains (*abicariš*; *gaiθām̄cā*; *māniyamcā*; *viθbišcā*). Darius flatters himself for having single-handedly led the revolt against the usurper, who was shortly afterward eliminated in a fortress in the Median district of Nisaya. In a later paragraph (DB 4.80-86) the new king mentions the names of six grandees who assisted him. Darius says in his Bīsotūn inscriptions that, by the grace of Ahura Mazdā, he restored the kingdom on its legitimate basis and became the ninth king issued from a family founded by Achaemenes (Haxāmaniš; DB 1.3-11, 68-71).

This story gained an immense popularity in antiquity, as shown by its many versions that circulated at the time. Among the classical authors, only one, Justin, applies the name Cometes to Gaumāta (1.9.7). The longest and the most detailed version is given by Herodotus, who gives the name of Smerdis to the usurper, and, like Darius, calls him a Magian, pushed to the throne by his brother (also a Magian), Patizeithes. Many analogies may easily be drawn between the Bīsotūn inscriptions and the account given by Herodotus (3.61-79); secret assassination of Cambyses' half brother, the Egyptian expedition, usurpation by the false Smerdis, his elimination by seven conspiring nobles, and, finally, the accession to supreme power by Darius, son of Hystaspes (*Vištāspa*). The list of the seven names, except for a single exception, is identical to that of Darius. The discrepancies are just as important, particularly the central role given by Herodotus to Otanes (*Utāna*), and also the Median connection attributed by the Greek historian to the rebellion of the false Smerdis, called not only Magian but Median as well (Herodotus, 3.73); according to Herodotus (3.65), the usurper seems even to have favored a return to Median hegemony (words spoken by Cambyses on his death bed). Herodotus (3.67) adds that except for Persians, all the peoples of Asia missed the false Smerdis because he had granted a three-year military draft and tax exemption to the peoples of the empire (same version given by Justin, 1.9.12).

We could multiply comparisons between the versions recounted by various classical authors (Herodotus, Ctesias, Justin, Aeschylus, etc.) without much result. Nor would making a conspectus list of the analogies and the discrepancies between Herodotus and the Bīsotūn inscriptions help us to arrive at perfectly reliable conclusions, because historians doubt both versions. It is obvious that Darius had much interest in presenting Gaumāta as a usurper and destroyer of traditions in order to demonstrate his most fundamental claim that he was guided and protected by Ahura Mazdā and the



sole legitimate descendant of a long dynastic and family succession. While in the Old Persian and Elamite texts Gaumāta is simply described as a Magian (*maguš*, *makuš* in Elamite), in the Babylonian version he is referred to as a “man from Media.” Are we supposed to conclude that this reference adds weight to the Median connection version of Herodotus? This conclusion does not seem to be justified (pace Schmitt, p. 110).

The only certainty is that the Babylonian tables confirm that for a few months a king was officially recognized by the name of Barziya/Bardiya. But was he Cambyses’ brother, or was he a Magian by the name of Gaumāta? That a number of historians have for a long time replied positively to the first question is because the contradictions and improbabilities of Darius’s version strengthen the hypothesis of a possible and even plausible mystification on his parts, as is the case with all the kings who come to power with force, claiming to have restored order and dealt with a usurper of uncertain and obscure origins who has destroyed social, religious, and moral traditions. In other words, it was vital for a man like Darius, who had no particular rights to the throne, to invent a character (Gaumāta) condemned for his acts against gods and men.

Some historians have tried to interpret this episode as a brutal shift in the balance of power within the ruling class, somehow leading to a restoration of aristocracy, which, in the short term, brought Darius to power, and, in the long term, prevented the creation of a centralized state. But such a hypothesis is hardly admissible (see Briant, 1996, chaps. 3-4), because it is first and foremost based on Herodotus and a factitious comparison with an obscure passage of the Bisotūn inscriptions. In fact, Herodotus says, before making the final choice, each conspirator had sworn to bestow exorbitant privileges upon the others should he become king (Herodotus, 3.80-84). Moreover, Herodotus is repeatedly used to explain paragraph 14 of the inscriptions (1.61-71). As a result of a questionable methodology, *kāra-* is said to mean “the nobility” and thereby it is maintained that Bardiya fought the nobility and Darius represented the restoration of the aristocracy. The fact is that *kāra-*, as much as *taššup* in Elamite and *uqu* in Babylonian, merely means people/army in the indeterminate social sense of “mass,” like the Greek *plethos* or the Latin *populus*. Besides, it may easily be observed that such privileges were never bestowed by Darius or his descendants upon the great aristocratic families, and the king *primus inter pares* and the seven mighty families are the two sides of the same historiographical myth. Although the disappearance of



Bardiya (the pseudo-Gaumāta invented by Darius) eventually paved the way for an “outsider” (Darius) to seize power, the former’s short reign does not, properly speaking, signify a disruption in the Achaemenid political history. Bardiya relied on the Persian aristocracy as much as his father (Cyrus) and his brother (Cambyses) did, and only a fraction of Persians rallied to Darius against him. His confiscation of land under precarious tenure (*bīt qašatu* in the Babylonian version) was aimed at these rebellious noblemen. In the light of this hypothesis, “Gaumāta’s case” seems to be rather banal, set against the long history of the Achaemenid dynasty, which saw many attempted usurpations carried out by brothers or sons of the reigning monarchs. Gaumāta has become a “historical figure” only because on the rock in Bisotūn and in the countries of his empire Darius tampered with timeless memories.

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