



## SISIGAMBIS

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**SISIGAMBIS**, the mother of [Darius III](#) and of [Stateira \(2\)](#), perhaps also of [Oxyathres](#) (for variants of his name, see [ROXANE](#)), who is described as a brother of Darius III.

*The name.* The form “Sisigambis” occurs in [Quintus Curtius Rufus](#) and must be correct, since it fits into a series of Persian names in Greek with Sisi-/OIr. \*Čiθra- “seed, lineage” (Sisimithres, Strabo, 11.11.4; S(e)isifernēs, Tissafernēs, and a shortened name Sisinēs: see Mayrhofer, no. 8.1885; Schmitt, no. 14; Huyse, nos. 113 ff.). In [Diodorus Siculus](#) the name appears as “Sisyngambris” (in every MS occurrence, according to the Teubner editor C. T. Fischer, p. 195 on Diod., 17.37.3). The form “Sisygambis,” which has become a favorite among modern scholars (see Bibliog. titles), has no ancient authority in the manuscripts used to reconstitute the text of Curtius. It was introduced by early editors, probably as a compromise with Diodorus’s form; unlike Curtius’s form, it has no parallels among transcriptions of Persian names.

*Accounts.* Very little is reliably reported about Sisigambis. She appears by name only in Diodorus and Curtius (in other sources only as “Darius’s mother”). We do not know the name of her father (Ostanes, brother of [Artaxerxes II](#) [Diod., 17.5.5] has been suggested) or her mother. Although she must have been an [Achaemenid](#), we do not know whether she belonged to the royal branch, which became extinct in the direct male line with the death of Artaxerxes IV [Arses](#) (see also [BAGOAS](#); Diod., 17.5.4-5). That connection would depend on what again we do not know: whether she was Darius’s birth mother or mother by adoption (see [DARIUS III](#) on the uncertain geneology). In



either case, the father (natural or adoptive), Arsanes, who was a nephew of [Artaxerxes II](#) and father of Stateira (2), presumably was her husband (Diod., 17.5.5; Curt., bk. 2 summary; on his name, see [STATEIRA](#)).

Sisigambis first appears in our accounts when she and other members of the immediate royal family are captured in the Persian base camp after the battle of Issus (ca. 5 November 333 BCE). They had been made, for political reasons, to follow Darius when he led his army against [Alexander the Great](#). (See Arrian, *Anab.* 2.11.9; Diod. 17.35.2 ff. = Curt. 3.11.21 ff.—the last two with pathetic elaboration.) This is where, in Diodorus and especially Curtius, history is abandoned for romance; we have to look for the facts in [Arrian](#), based on Ptolemy and Aristobulus (see Arr., 2.12.6). Hearing that the women were most concerned about the fate of Darius, Alexander sent a messenger to them, to assure them that Darius was alive and had fled. (So also Plutarch, *Alex.* 21, with moralizing elaboration.) In Diodorus 17.37.5-38 = Curt. 3.12.15-26, Alexander and Hephaestion visit the captive women, Sisigambis mistakes Hephaestion for Alexander, and Alexander, after correcting her error, promises that the royal family will be treated with all the respect they enjoyed before and retain their ornaments and privileges. The two sources add that he addresses Sisigambis as “Mother.” Arrian reports the gist of this as a “story” (*logos*) but omits the appellation “Mother,” probably thinking that would stamp the story as fiction. Arrian is alone in not reporting any personal contact between Alexander and Sisigambis at any time.

At the battle of [Gaugamela](#) (1 October 331 BCE), when [Mazaesus](#)’s forces temporarily succeed in entering the Macedonian camp, Sisigambis refuses to be freed (so Diod., 17.59.7 = Curt., 4.15.10-11), fearing the vagaries of fortune (Diodorus adds gratitude towards Alexander as another motive). There is no mention of this in Arr., 3.14.5. (as a “story”). Nor does he mention (what must be true) that the royal family was left behind at [Susa](#) for safety, as Alexander continued his march into the heartland of Persia; nor, surprisingly, does Diodorus make much of this action (17.67.1). Curtius (5.2.17-22) expands the account into a small novella: Alexander gives Sisigambis rich gifts but unwittingly causes offense; the misunderstanding is cleared up, and the tale ends by his assuring her that in his eyes she is equal to his mother, Olympias.

After Alexander’s defeat of the [Uxii](#), the survivors beg Sisigambis to intercede for them. Ptolemy is cited by Arrian (3.17.6) as reporting that she begged him to leave them land to live on; he does so, but imposes an annual tribute (since they did not use money) of horses, transport animals, and thirty thousand

sheep—seemingly a crushing burden. Curtius has a different story: the Uxii ask her to intercede, “knowing that he loved and honored her like a mother”; surprisingly, she is reluctant, because she is a captive rather than an ex-queen. In the end she pleads with him by letter to spare them, or at least their chieftain, who was a relative of hers; he responds by freeing all the prisoners, leaving their “city” untouched and relieving them of tribute. Curtius must have known he was writing pure fiction, to fit in with his idealization of the relationship between the two.

The next chapter in this historical novel is (surprisingly) provided by Plutarch: he reports (*Alex.* 43.3) that after Darius’s death Alexander sent his body to his mother, who was, no doubt, still at Susa. There is, fortunately, no danger of believing this, although H. Berve (p. 357) does so without any comment: as the Loeb editor of Plutarch notes, in Arrian (3.22.1) we are told, probably from Ptolemy and perhaps Aristobulus, that Alexander sent the body to [Persepolis](#), to be buried among the tombs of his predecessors.

The story of the death of Sisigambis fitly concludes the novel: hearing of Alexander’s death, she is overcome by grief and kills herself by fasting (Diod., 17.118.3; the account is rhetorically built by Curtius, 10.5.21-25, with a moralizing conclusion; Justin, 13.1.5-6, stresses that she mourned him as a son). The suicide is, no doubt, fact: she knew what to expect under the rule of the barons, and her grandchildren’s fate proved her right (see STATEIRA [3]).

The story of Sisigambis is important chiefly because so much that can be shown to be fiction has been believed (often without comment) by modern scholars, who find in it further justification for their admiration of Alexander, just as (especially) Curtius did.

*Studies.* The full biographical treatment by Berve (II, pp. 356-57, no. 711) and the shorter one by P. Schoch recognize that much of what we find in Diodorus and especially in Curtius is “rhetorically embellished” (so Schoch). Yet both authors claim to give more information than can properly be deduced from the sources, much of it based on a misconception of Darius III (“Dareios Kodomannos” in Schoch; cf. Berve p. 116, ascribing the name to Darius perhaps only after his elevation to the throne) and failure to understand Diod., 17.5-6 on Darius’s background and selection for the throne (see DARIUS III). After the details on Sisigambis’s personal background, presented without warning about its conjectural nature, Schoch’s shorter treatment ignores much of the romantic fiction: the only item that he finds dubious is her refusal



to escape during the battle of Gaugamela.

Berve is less critical and more misleading; thus he cites Arrian, Diodorus, and Curtius for Alexander's personal visit to Sisigambis after her capture, failing to warn the reader that Arrian marks this as a "story" and that it is not in his two main sources. He also follows Curtius in reporting that Alexander, at Sisigambis' plea, granted the Uxii full pardon, ignoring the heavy tribute imposed on them, according to Ptolemy's account; and he presents as fact the story that Alexander sent Darius's body to her, not even mentioning the more plausible alternative. On the other hand, he rejects the account of her suicide (not only its alleged motive), preferring to believe that she happened to die a natural death at the time of Alexander's own.

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