

THE ATTACK ON NAXOS: A 'FORGOTTEN CAUSE' OF THE IONIAN REVOLT

Herodotus tells us that some Naxian oligarchic exiles approached Aristagoras who was then ruling Miletus as deputy for his father-in-law Histiaeus, and asked him to help them return to power.¹ Aristagoras, who saw a possible advantage for himself in the request, was willing to oblige but, as the matter lay beyond his competence, he put the project before Artaphernes, who, he said, governed all the peoples of the sea-coast of Asia.² Artaphernes, in turn, brought the plan to the attention of Darius, who gave his consent. An army and a fleet of two hundred ships was made ready and placed under the command of Megabates. After a feint in the direction of the Hellespont the fleet put in at Caucasa preparatory to swooping on Naxos. There, however, a quarrel broke out between Aristagoras and Megabates over a disciplinary matter and the Persian, in a fit of pique, sent a message to warn the Naxians. As a result they were ready for the siege which proved to be a miserable failure. Aristagoras feared he would pay dearly for this débâcle and when a message urging revolt arrived from Histiaeus, he immediately acted upon it.³

One point in this seemingly straightforward account has caused difficulties. With a unanimity rare among ancient historians, virtually every scholar who has examined the account has come to the conclusion that Megabates could not have done what Herodotus says he did.⁴ Nevertheless, it is my contention that we should believe Herodotus⁵ and, if we do, we shall be able to cast a little more light on the origin of the Ionian Revolt.

We begin, therefore, by asking who conceivably could have warned the Naxians? The list of suspects may be tabulated as follows:

- (a) Megabates just as Herodotus says.
- (b) Aristagoras, the favourite suspect for those who wish to acquit Megabates.
- (c) A common Greek seaman.
- (d) Some of the Naxians who repented of what they had done.⁶

And one other possibility which must be mentioned.

(e) Nobody warned the Naxians. The Persian feint failed and, knowing well in advance that an invasion was coming, the islanders had made due preparation to meet it.⁷

On the grounds that there is no evidence to support them we may immediately

¹ Probably in 500 B.C. – see How and Wells, ii.12.

² In fact he was most likely supreme in western Asia Minor and the exaggeration here (cf. How and Wells, ii.9 and 11) probably arises from Aristagoras' desire to impress the suppliants. See further n. 28.

³ Hdt. 5.30–6.

⁴ There would be little point in giving even a selective list. More interesting are the dissenters: E. Curtius, *The History of Greece*, trans. A. W. Ward (London, 1869), ii.173–5; G. Grote, *History of Greece* (London, 1907), iii.493–5; W. G. Forrest, 'Motivation in Herodotus: The Case of the Ionian Revolt', *IHR*, 1 (1979), 319. On the views of J. A. S. Evans, 'Histaeus and Aristagoras: Notes on the Ionian Revolt', *AJP*, 84 (1963), 118, see below.

⁵ In part, I shall, in this paper, be offering a detailed justification for the picture Grote and Forrest (n. 4) adumbrate.

⁶ This view is favoured by A. R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks*² (London, 1984), p. 196.

⁷ How and Wells, ii.13, believe the feint failed whereas Burn, pp. 195–6, believes it worked.

reject (c) and (d). Despite the claims of M. Long elsewhere, we must surely argue from what our evidence actually tells us rather than importing into our account *a priori* theories which cannot be proved.⁸ In any case it would probably be difficult for either a common seaman or a Naxian to commandeer a boat and, in the case of the Naxians, repentance is unlikely. Herodotus tells us they expected their fellow-countrymen would obey them the moment they appeared off the island.⁹

We may rule out (e) on the grounds that it is misconceived. While it is obviously not beyond the bounds of possibility that the Naxians knew beforehand what was afoot this does not entitle us to assume that those on the fleet knew that they knew. An otiose warning to men already prepared is very easy to envisage.

Thus, if we are still intent on acquitting Megabates we are left with (b) Aristagoras as our prime suspect. Against his candidature, it might simply be urged that he would have been a fool to act thus given what was at stake. After all, the plight in which he found himself when the expedition eventually failed was so severe as to leave him no means of escape save rebellion against the king. On the other hand, it should be remembered that Aristagoras was not calculating coolly but acting in anger. He could very well have done something in the heat of the moment which he would afterwards long have cause to regret. In my opinion, one vital consideration tells against this view. The sending of the warning is surely to be seen as an act of spite by someone looking for revenge after being worsted in a bruising encounter. By no stretch of the imagination could Aristagoras be described in these latter terms. He had successfully asserted his authority, freed Scylax and, for good measure, reminded Megabates to his face as to who was in charge.¹⁰ Therefore, we may acquit Aristagoras of sending the message for the simple reason that he had no motive for doing so.¹¹

This naturally brings us to (a) Megabates. The argument against Herodotus' version of events seems to rest on two interconnected props. It is said that, since Megabates was an Achaemenid and cousin to both Darius and Artaphernes he would never have done such a thing. And, if perchance he did, he could never have hoped to get away with it.¹²

Let us examine, first of all, the second of these props. In fact, the risk of impaling or flaying was virtually non-existent. After their quarrel the man most likely to lay information against Megabates would have been Aristagoras and all our evidence suggests that in any issue of substance Darius, for all his fondness for people like Histiaeus, would side with his own folk rather than with a Greek. Thus, when Megabazus suggested that Histiaeus' activities at Myrcinus were potentially treasonous, the king's reaction was not to invite Histiaeus to state his side of the case but to haul him up to Susa where he could be watched.¹³ Again, we are told that, even after the harm caused by the Ionian Revolt, Darius was still minded to forgive Histiaeus. Fearing this, Artaphernes and Harpagus had him impaled. Yet the king's

⁸ I do not think it necessary to discuss Long's views (*Historia*, 1968) in detail since, in my opinion, they have been adequately refuted by Waters (*Historia*, 1970) and Chapman (*Historia*, 1972).

⁹ Hdt. 5.30.

¹⁰ It should be carefully noted that Megabates was not able to stop him. See further below for the full significance of this.

¹¹ Hdt. 5.33, on Aristagoras' authority. See further below for a detailed treatment.

¹² Hdt. 5.32, with How and Wells, i.387–8, ii.13. It might, of course, be argued that it is dangerous to postulate an individual's actions at a specific moment by reference to the attitudes of his peer group. However, I hope to show that Megabates behaved pretty much as one might expect any Persian noble to do.

¹³ Hdt. 5.23–4.

only reaction was *ἐπαυτῆσάμενος τοὺς ταῦτα ποιήσαντας ὅτι μιν οὐ ζῶντα ἀνήγαγον ἐς ὄψιν τὴν ἑωυτοῦ*.¹⁴ Finally, we should bear steadily in mind that, at the end of the Naxian expedition, one of the things from which Aristagoras feared evil would come was his quarrel with Megabates.¹⁵ I take this to mean that, whatever the truth of the matter, Megabates' version of events would be the one which would be believed.¹⁶

So, it is tolerably clear that, if Megabates did betray the expedition, he had little to fear.¹⁷ But had he any motive for this betrayal? In order to answer this question we must examine the relationship between the Persian nobility and the tyrants Histiaeus and Aristagoras.

If there is one characteristic which marks out the pair right up to the moment they rebelled then it is their unswerving loyalty to Persia. But it was a fealty grounded on self-interest. As Histiaeus reminded his audience on the Danube, should the king fall then assuredly they would fall with him.¹⁸ However, both also exhibit in full measure another trait: ambition. They clearly intended to rise high in the world under the aegis of their master. Thus, while we may disbelieve Megabazus' slander,¹⁹ it is legitimate to infer that Histiaeus was an active and energetic governor of Myrcinus. Again, we should remember that when Aristagoras promised help to the Naxians he did so with a view to becoming ruler of the island himself.²⁰ Therefore, we may say that so long as the king's interests were the same as those of Histiaeus and Aristagoras then they would serve him well but should those interests diverge then we could expect them to waver.

In the case of Histiaeus the break came when he was plucked from Myrcinus. Undoubtedly a great honour had been conferred on him²¹ but, as Louis XIV if no other knew, honour can often be a substitute for power. Histiaeus' active career was over and the only prospect before him was sitting at the king's table, the ancient Persian equivalent of the *levée* and the *couchée*. If anybody doubts this they need only reflect on the lengths to which he went in order to get out of the court.²²

But we must remember it was not blind Fate which brought Histiaeus to this pass but a very human agency: the hatred and jealousy of certain members of the Persian court. To account for this phenomenon and to offer illustrative examples of it is not difficult. The Persians, in general, saw themselves as superior to the rest of mankind and, the further another nation was from them, the less regard they had for it. Of Greeks they seem to have had a low opinion. Their nobility, in addition, must have had that hauteur which characterises all nobilities and they probably had it in a double measure for theirs was a society where not only did every man know his place but was expected to give outward signs that he did.²³ Bearing all this in mind it is not difficult to see why the Persian nobility might take a jaundiced view of the rise of a

¹⁴ Hdt. 6.30.

¹⁵ Hdt. 5.35.

¹⁶ This, I think, must call in question Forrest's contention (p. 319) that Darius would be 'open-minded' in choosing between Greek and Persian. His indulgence was great but it had limits. See further n. 24.

¹⁷ We should also remember that, acting in anger, he would probably disregard any slight risk there was.

¹⁸ Hdt. 4.137.

¹⁹ See below for justification of this view.

²⁰ Hdt. 5.30.

²¹ How and Wells, ii.9.

²² Like Forrest, p. 314, I adopt Macan's summing up of Histiaeus' position, 'better to reign in Miletus than serve in Susa'.

²³ Hdt. 1.134, 153. On the relations between Greeks and Persians see Forrest, pp. 317-19.

pushy and bumptious Greek like Histiaeus.²⁴ Moreover, it is likely they might want to do something to stop him. Thus Megabazus' charges against him were mere slander. As How and Wells ii.9, remark, 'the idea of a great Graeco-Barbarian power in Thrace strong enough to be a danger to the Persian empire is strange'. And it is not just a question of resources. Evans, p. 117, is succinct and to the point on motive and opportunity, 'but if Histiaeus would not rebel from Darius when he had a golden opportunity [i.e. on the Danube], is it conceivable he would try a revolt in Thrace, where there was a Persian army present?' There is, I think, but one conclusion to be drawn. Megabazus laid his charges with malignant intent, wishing to ruin Histiaeus and he may be fairly said to have succeeded.²⁵ Later, when Histiaeus contrived to get out of Susa armed with an important commission from the king, Artaphernes set about halting his career. It is a moot point whether or not Histiaeus actually intended to redeem his promise to Darius and pacify Ionia.²⁶ What is beyond doubt is that when Artaphernes whispered in his ear that he knew who started the revolt, Histiaeus took fright and joined the rebels. It might be argued, of course, that, under the circumstances, Artaphernes only did what any good satrap should. But is not an oblique warning like this a strange mode of procedure for so powerful a figure? Why, for instance, did Artaphernes not denounce Histiaeus to the king, as had been done once before? The sequel, I would suggest, answers this last question and also reveals Artaphernes' resolve to be rid of the turbulent tyrant. He knew full well that no matter what Histiaeus did Darius would forgive him, and so the only way to destroy him was by provoking him into rebellion and killing him in the field.²⁷

²⁴ How and Wells, ii.74, note that the Persian nobility distrusted Histiaeus but without bringing out the full significance of this attitude. They also claim Histiaeus was feared by the Persian nobility but this seems unlikely. Forrest indeed suggests (p. 320) that the Ionian revolt arose out of a struggle between Artaphernes on the one hand and Histiaeus and Aristagoras on the other as to who would control Ionia for Darius. I am not sure, however, that it is necessary to go this far. The very fact that a pair like this could achieve any influence with the king would be a sufficient blow to the self-esteem of the Persian nobility to make them want to hate them passionately and as we shall see, work for their destruction. We should perhaps bear in mind in this respect what was said above about how far Darius was prepared to exercise his phil-Hellenic tendencies. Note also the remarks of Evans, p. 117.

²⁵ Hdt. 5.23-4. On the theme of Persian distrust note, for what it is worth, that Herodotus has Megabazus characterise Histiaeus as ἀνδρὶ Ἑλληνι δεινῷ τε καὶ σοφῷ.

²⁶ Evans, p. 127 and Forrest, pp. 319-20 incline to the view that he did. The Chians certainly had their suspicions of him (Hdt. 6.2) and it is possible he was simply overtaken by events (Hdt. 6.5). In support of his thesis Forrest draws attention to the use of Histiaeus' name 'by Artabanos in 480 as an example of loyalty'. But in the passage in question (Hdt. 7.10) Histiaeus is not invoked as an example of loyalty but of what could happen to you if you embarked on military adventures. Your fate could depend on the will of one man. See further next note.

²⁷ Hdt. 5.106-7, 6.1-2, 30. Three further points deserve mention. If, in spite of his complicity in starting the revolt, Histiaeus was willing and able (n. 26) to pacify Ionia, then Artaphernes, in acting as he did, was putting personal animus before the interests of Persia and, it may be added, the policy of the king. The mysterious Persians at Sardis with whom Histiaeus corresponded (Hdt. 6.4) might, one supposes, 'be Lydians who still nourished national aspirations' (How and Wells, ii.67) but are more likely, perhaps, to be members of the satrapal court. If that is so, another possibility presents itself. During his time at Susa Histiaeus had become friendly with enemies of Artaphernes which would give the satrap yet another reason for wishing to be rid of him. On all of this see Evans, pp. 123-8. Finally, Darius' willingness to forgive Histiaeus does not necessarily involve the assumption of Forrest, p. 320 that he never directly acted against the interests of the king for another explanation, grounded on what we know of Darius and Persians in general, lies to hand. As a follower of Ahura Mazda Darius was wont to weigh up the good and ill a man had done in order to determine which was the greater (Hdt. 7.194) and it is not unreasonable to suppose he did so in the case of Histiaeus.

It is, therefore, tolerably clear that the Persian nobility did not really like Histiaeus very much and were only too willing to frustrate his ambitions. It is also safe to assume they felt the same way about Aristagoras. Nothing that we know of him suggests that he would be any more lovable than his cousin.²⁸ So far as the Persians were concerned, he and Histiaeus were two of a kind, and, once we recognise this, we are in a position to see that (a) is the correct choice from among the possibilities we have listed for we can say that Megabates' behaviour is of a piece with that of the rest of the Persian nobility when confronted with a cheeky Greekling.

We have already seen that Megabates was sprung from the noblest in the land,²⁹ and as a scion of the royal house we may presume that he had a certain regard for himself. One can easily imagine that such a man would not find it easy to take orders from a Greek yet that is what he had to do. Herodotus makes it plain that Aristagoras had overall command of the expedition. Artaphernes assigned two hundred ships (presumably Greek) together with troops drawn from the Persians and their allies to the expedition, and he placed Megabates in command of this force.³⁰ The armament then made its way to Miletus where it picked up what seems to be a second squadron comprising an Ionian force and the Naxian exiles.³¹ Thus far then we have seen Megabates as commander of the fleet and all that is in it and it is in that capacity that he jammed Scylax through the oarhole. The stages of Aristagoras' intervention which followed must now be scrutinised.

He, first of all, asked that Scylax be released but the request was refused. This might suggest that Aristagoras had no power of command but what happened next shows otherwise. Using his own authority Aristagoras had Scylax set free and it should be carefully noted that Megabates was powerless to stop him. He commanded an army and a fleet but all he could do was rage at Aristagoras. And the reason for his impotence is clear for, as Aristagoras told him, he was in charge and they would go where he ordered. Thus, we see a clash between the commander-in-chief, who had overall direction of the expedition, and his subordinate, who was responsible for the day-to-day management of the armament. We also see Aristagoras' initial courtesy for what it was. Though he could, as he ultimately did, use his authority, he obviously preferred, since this was Megabates' special sphere, to interfere as little as possible and allow the Persian to exercise his own powers. Out of a somewhat clumsily arranged command structure there came the fatal clash.³² And finally we see how Megabates' patience at last snapped. If Persian attitudes were such as I have described them above, then Megabates can hardly have welcomed being placed under the command of a Greek. Yet he endured until the day that Greek publicly ordered him

Bearing in mind what the tyrant had once saved him from, it comes as no surprise to learn he reached the conclusion he did.

²⁸ It is true that Aristagoras boasted of his friendship for Artaphernes (Hdt. 5.30) but this was intended to impress the Naxians. When things went wrong he had no expectations of aid or protection from Artaphernes (Hdt. 5.35). Cf. n. 2.

²⁹ See n. 12.

³⁰ Hdt. 5.32.

³¹ Hdt. 5.33. The narrative sequence would seem to suggest two separate forces were in question – so Macan *ad loc.* (*contra* Burn, p. 195). At any rate, Macan is surely right to say the combined forces were under the command of Megabates.

³² Macan says, 'the exact authority of Megabates in the story is represented as ill-defined – *'Hinc illae lacrymae'*'. On the contrary, it seems to me that, in Herodotus, his authority, its relationship to the authority of Aristagoras and the way that relationship might lead to tears are perfectly clear.

about and then humiliated him. At that point he did what other members of his class did: he set about ruining the upstart and wrecking his ambitious schemes.³³

Thus, I would argue, we must believe what Herodotus tells us of Megabates' part in the ruin of the Naxian expedition, and when we do we see a little more clearly why there was an Ionian Revolt. Once before jealous Persian nobles had forced Histiaeus into such a position that he was by this time ready for revolt.³⁴ Now, it was Aristagoras' turn to fall victim to the same malignancy, to be put into a similar plight and to seek a similar way of escape. As an explanation for the Ionian Revolt, this, of course, can only be partial and will no doubt be repugnant to those who think of history as a collection of sociological abstractions.³⁵ But, if we accept (as, indeed, we must) that conditions in Ionia were ripe for revolt,³⁶ then we should surely ask ourselves what it was that led (drove, is, perhaps, a better word) Histiaeus and Aristagoras to exploit them. The answer is the hatred of the Persian nobility, so dramatically illustrated by Megabates, which thwarted their ambitions and made of these once loyal subjects enemies to the king.

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³³ Of this incident, Evans, p. 118, says, 'one would like to know why it is inherently incredible'. I hope I have shown why it is 'by no means as incredible as it has seemed to many' (Forrest, p. 319). Evans objects to its veracity on the grounds that it is an 'inside story' for which Herodotus would probably not have a reliable source. But an incident on board a ship is public and not of a piece with the scene in, say, Hdt. 3.134.

³⁴ Hdt. 5.35.

³⁵ For some pertinent remarks see Forrest, pp. 311–14.

³⁶ For discussions of conditions in Ionia at this time see P. Tozzi, *La Rivolta Ionica* (Pisa, 1978), pp. 114–33 and Forrest, pp. 315–17.