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The revolt of Petubastis IV during the reigns of Cambyses and Darius

Olaf E. Kaper

In 2015, I published a study on the king Petubastis IV, triggered by the find of a temple decorated in his name that had been erected in Dakhla Oasis (Kaper 2015).¹ The study demonstrated that this king, who ruled during the early years of the Persian domination, had been far more important than was previously realised. The new material established that Petubastis IV had successfully revolted against Persian rule after which he had been crowned in Memphis and that he controlled Upper Egypt. Moreover, his reign lasted long enough to undertake building activities in the Dakhla Oasis, which must have been an important power base for him. This paper gave the impetus to a new study of the rebellion by Uzume Wijnsma,² who confirmed my findings while interpreting the new data in relation to the Bisitun inscription and the other known rebellions against Persian domination under Cambyses, Bardiya I and Darius I. Frédéric Payraudeau has published a new history of Late Period Egypt, in which the Petubastis revolt is also included in detail.³ In the present volume, Damien Agut-Labordère presents a new study of Cambyses' interest in the oases of the Western Desert. These studies stimulate further discussion of the period and the historical issues involved, and in the present contribution, I will focus on two crucial points in the debate: The start of the revolt of Petubastis IV, and the aims of Cambyses' purported expedition into the Western Desert.

1 When did the revolt of Petubastis IV commence?

Both Wijnsma and Agut-Labordère identify Petubastis with one of the liar-kings mentioned in the Bisitun inscription. This identification has become inescapable

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- 1 Since that publication, the topic was also referred to in Kaper (2015b) 51–54; Kaper (2017) and in Kaper (2018) 271–272.
 - 2 Wijnsma (2018).
 - 3 Payraudeau (2020) 284–286. Dodson (2018) provides a summary on Petubastis IV.

following the recent findings in Dakhla. Wijnsma also attempts to determine the minimal length of the revolt, and concludes that this lasted “at least two years, perhaps more than three years”.⁴ Her careful argumentation is hindered by a “documentary gap” between 522 and 518 BC when there are particularly few sources to work with.⁵

The Bisitun text describes how, during the time Darius stayed in Babylon in December 522 BC, a series of revolts broke out against him, including in Egypt. Subsequently, Darius fought a series of battles and he claims to have crushed the rebellions and killed the responsible “liar-kings”.⁶ The remarkable omission of Egypt among the list of defeated enemies indicates that the Egyptian rebellion was not crushed immediately, and it is also noticeable that the name of the Egyptian “liar-king” is not given. Again in the later additions to the Bisitun inscription, in which Darius boasts about the defeat of Elam and Scythia in his second and third regnal years, Egypt is not mentioned.⁷ This silence is one of the strongest arguments for the success and longevity of the Egyptian rebellion, which was probably crushed only in 518 BC. However, we need to determine how accurate the Bisitun inscription is as a historical source for the start of the rebellions. Wijnsma accepts the information in the Bisitun inscription for the start of the rebellion in Egypt in December 522. At the same time, she admits that one of the rebellions in the Bisitun list, that of Nebuchadnezzar III in Babylon, is known to have started already in August 522, before Darius had made his claim to the throne.⁸ Apparently, the rebellions did not all coincide, and some may have started already before Darius’ reign. The Bisitun text simplified this situation with the aim of presenting Darius as a strong king who overcame many initial difficulties. The Babylon example shows that we should not exclude the possibility that the Egyptian revolt also started earlier. Wijnsma considers three alternative scenarios for the revolt, but all with the same starting moment in December 522 or the months immediately thereafter.⁹ Payraudeau has likewise opted for a start of the rebellion during the confusion following the departure of Cambyses from Egypt.¹⁰ Agut-Labordère says, more carefully, that the rebellious king assumed authority as king after Cambyses left Egypt, leaving open the possibility that the rebellion had already started earlier. There is indeed an

4 Wijnsma (2018) 173.

5 Wijnsma (2018) 159–161.

6 Kurth (2007) 140–157, §21.

7 Wijnsma (2018) 167.

8 Wijnsma (2018) 163.

9 Wijnsma (2018) 165.

10 Payraudeau (2020) 285.

argument in support of an earlier start of the rebellion itself, namely the fateful military expedition sent by Cambyses into the Western Desert.

2 What was the purpose of Cambyses' desert expedition?

The desert campaign of Cambyses is only recorded by Herodotus (3.25–26), but with a large amount of detail and with mention of different sources, so that this story deserves to be taken as more than an anti-Persian fantasy. Admittedly, there are some serious problems with the contents of the story,¹¹ but the description of the army departing from Thebes and arriving in the town of Oasis seven days later is entirely credible.¹² The major elements of uncertainty concern the purpose of this expedition, and its subsequent route.

Agut-Labordère has concluded that the expedition was a preventive measure directed against the prosperous oases that, also because of their connections to Cyrenaica, were considered likely to revolt.¹³ There is no evidence to support this theory. There is, however, an alternative scenario that provides a more urgent motivation for Cambyses' desert campaign once we accept that the revolt of Petubastis may well have commenced earlier than 522 BC, as was argued above, and that the oases played an important role in the revolt. The presence of a temple built in the name of Petubastis IV in Amheida, Dakhla Oasis, is an argument in favour of the importance of this particular oasis for the rebel king.¹⁴ Additional support for an oasis link of the rebellion is the remarkably intensive investment in the infrastructure of the Southern Oasis (Kharga and Dakhla) that becomes apparent after the defeat of Petubastis.¹⁵ If the revolt used the Southern Oasis as its power base, then the measures taken by Darius I were aimed at re-establishing control over the oases. Moreover, the desert expedition of Cambyses may then be explained as a punitive measure aimed at suppressing a dangerous rebellion, or in Herodotus' words: "to reduce the Ammonians to total slavery." (3.25.3) The revolt explains why the arduous journey through the desert needed to be made, and why it should be a large force. It also helps to explain why the expedition did not return, because they were facing major military opposition from a rebellious group in the oasis. The story of the sandstorm was always

11 Kaper (2015a) 139–140.

12 Wagner (1987) 124; Kaper (2015a) 140.

13 Agut-Labordère, this volume.

14 Kaper (2015a) 135, 137.

15 Kaper (2015a) 144–145.

more fantastic than it could be credible,¹⁶ but a military confrontation is more likely to have dispersed the Persian army and severely reduced its number.

After the defeat of the Persian army, the rebel forces managed to expand their territory to the north, and they even wrested the capital Memphis away from Persian control.¹⁷ It remains an open question whether the Persian forces remained in control of part of the delta, as the inscription of Udjahorresne seems to suggest,¹⁸ or whether the entire country was united under Petubastis IV. In any case, after a few years, Darius I managed to regain control over the country and the rebellion was soon forgotten. Herodotus did not hear about Petubastis' revolt, and he only managed to record a confusing story about the army of Cambyses that got lost in a sandstorm.

As for the chronology of the revolt, it is important to take into account two dated papyri that are probably from year 8 of Cambyses, and which were found at Asyut.¹⁹ These documents show that Cambyses was still recognised as ruler in Middle Egypt in 522 BC, shortly before his death. If the Petubastis revolt had indeed already started in the Southern Oasis under Cambyses, the spreading of the revolt over the rest of Egypt must have taken place only after Cambyses had left the country. In this light, the reference to the Egyptian revolt in the Bisitun inscription can be understood as referring to the Upper Egyptian rebellion of Petubastis spreading to the capital Memphis at the start of Darius' reign, as is also concluded by Agut-Labordère (this volume).

3 Who were the Ammonians?

One more point in Herodotus' narrative still requires some further comments. According to Herodotus, Cambyses aimed to "reduce the Ammonians to total slavery and to set fire to the oracle of Zeus".²⁰ The term Ammonians in combination with the oracle of Zeus (Ammon) has always led commentators to link this story to the oasis of Siwa. This is partly because Herodotus describes the Spring of the Sun of the Ammonians (4.181.2–4), which is known from various other, mostly Latin, authors as a specific spring in Siwa.²¹ However, the reconstruction presented above gives more weight to the Dakhla Oasis than to Siwa. It can be concluded, as does Agut-Labordère (this volume), that

16 Lloyd (1988) 63; Kaper (2015a) 141; Schwab, this volume.

17 Kaper (2015a) 138.

18 Kaper (2015a) 138.

19 Wijnsma (2018) 162.

20 Translation Purvis (2007) 218.

21 Corcella (2007) 705.

Herodotus employs the term Ammonians with a wider geographical reference than later sources. This is most explicit in his description of the Ammonians in 4.181.2: “The first of these peoples, on a ten-days’ journey from Thebes, are the Ammonians. They have a sanctuary of Zeus derived from that of Theban Zeus which, as I mentioned earlier, has an image of Zeus with a ram’s head”.²²

Only Dakhla Oasis lies at ten days’ distance from Thebes, and it had a cult centre for Amun-Re of Karnak in its capital, Mut el-Kharab.²³ There is at present little evidence for the iconography of Amun-Re in Dakhla from before the Roman period, but in later images, e.g. at the temple of Deir el-Hagar, Amun often has a ram’s head and rams were kept as a sacred animal and buried at El-Muzawwaga cemetery.²⁴ Therefore, Herodotus’ mention of the Ammonians could as well refer to the inhabitants of Dakhla as to Siwa and probably the other oases too. All oases of the Western desert were dominated by cults of the god Amun with a ram’s iconography.²⁵ The temple of Hibis in Kharga was dedicated to Amun-Re, as was the main temple of Dakhla, at Mut el-Kharab, where Amun shared this position with the god Seth. Amun was also important in Bahariya,²⁶ and of course in Siwa,²⁷ but the Southern Oasis seems to be particularly important here, because it was the first region on the road of Cambyses’ army.

There is no later source that refers to the inhabitants of the Southern Oasis as Ammonians, but Herodotus’ perception of the geography of the Western Desert is schematic and combines data he heard about different oases merged into one.²⁸ One of the problems that may have led to this confusion was that there were no separate names in Greek for the five large oases that we distinguish nowadays, not until much later.²⁹ When Herodotus mentions the oracle of Siwa it is simply designated as “the oracle of Ammon in Libya” (1.46.2). The other Egyptian oases he merges with Siwa into one and calls all of its inhabitants Ammonians. Because Siwa was the most famous among the oases, especially with the Greeks, the oracle of Ammon (Zeus) is mentioned in the tale about the lost army of Cambyses, in which it did, in fact, not belong. Alan Lloyd has commented that “Greek observers subsequently embellished the tale under the

22 Translation Purvis (2007) 356.

23 Hope (2005) 4.

24 Winlock (1936) 36, pls 20–22, 24–25.

25 Guerneur (2005) 564.

26 Guerneur (2005) 428–434; Labrique (2008).

27 Guerneur (2005) 423–427; Vaelske (2017).

28 Leclant (1950) 242–243.

29 Wagner (1987) 125–126; 138–140.

influence of the anti-Cambyses tradition into an abortive attempt to destroy one of the most famous and respected oracular shrines in the world'.²⁹ ³⁰

4 Conclusion

The revolt of Petubastis IV may have started in the Southern Oasis already during the reign of Cambyses. The story of the army that was sent into the Western Desert, as related by Herodotus, is to be taken seriously exactly because it refers to an enemy presence in the oases at this point in time. The recent find in Dakhla of a temple decorated in the name of king Petubastis IV demonstrates that his rebellion was successful and provided stability for a while, at least in Upper Egypt. It is likely that Darius resumed control of the country only in 518 BC, which means that the Petubastis' rebellion may have lasted for four years.

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30 Lloyd (1988) 64.

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