

“SCYTHIAN STRATEGY” OR OPEN PITCHED BATTLE: CHOICE OF STRATEGY BY THE PERSIAN COMMAND IN 334 BC

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the analysis of the Persian command's plans to repel Alexander the Great's invasion into Asia Minor. The main objective is to consider the information from the ancient sources related to Memnon of Rhodes' proposal to apply the "scorched earth" tactic against the advancing Alexander's army, to analyze this plan for feasibility and to identify the reasons for rejection of Memnon's plan by the Persian satraps and commanders. The research was undertaken based on the principle of historicism. A multi-faceted approach to the ancient narrative sources, methods of comparative historical analysis, content analysis, and the historical reconstructive method have been used. As a result, it was determined that the Persians knew well the features of the "Scythian strategy" and applied the "scorched earth" tactic both before and after Alexander's invasion. However, Persian satraps and commanders rejected Memnon's proposal at the council at Zeleia and adopted the open pitched battle. The reasons include numerous shortcomings and unfeasibility of Memnon's plan, the positive sides of which were greatly exaggerated by ancient historians, who openly sympathized with Memnon of Rhodes and were critical towards the Persians.

Keywords: Achaemenid Empire, strategy, Asia Minor, Alexander the Great, Memnon of Rhodes, Darius III.

INTRODUCTION

The war between the Achaemenid Empire and Alexander the Great is often studied by researchers, but in most cases they focus on the actions of Alexander's army, which is explained by the specifics of historical sources. However, it is impossible to study the circumstances of the fall of the Achaemenid Empire without a detailed analysis of the plans and actions of its defenders. The data of the written tradition on the problem of choosing a strategy that the Persians faced in the spring of 334 BC, when at the council at Zeleia Memnon of Rhodes proposed the use of the "scorched earth" tactic against Alexander the Great's army, are of particular interest in this regard.

METHODOLOGY

The research was undertaken based on the principle of historicism. Special priority has been given to the principle of a multi-faceted approach to the ancient narrative sources. Ancient texts were considered in the context of scholarly interpretations. The comparative historical analysis has been used due to the incomplete nature of historical data. The content analysis was conducted when working with historiography. The key research issue is solved by using the historical reconstructive method.

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RESULTS

The ancient authors date an active phase of the identification by the Persians of a strategy for countering the Macedonian threat to the time immediately after Alexander's army landed on the coast of Asia Minor. According to Arrian's *Anabasis*, commanders Arsames, Rheomithres, Petenes and Niphates, Arsites, a satrap of Hellespontine Phrygia, Spithridates, a satrap of Lydia and Ionia, together with the "barbarian" cavalry and mercenary infantry, gathered at the Persian military camp near the town of Zeleia. After receiving the information that Alexander crossed the strait, they held a council, at which Memnon of Rhodes advised fighting against the enemy, as the Macedonian infantry was stronger and Alexander was in the army and Darius wasn't. It is stated that Memnon proposed to retreat, trample down the forage crop with cavalry, burn the harvest without mercy on their own cities. Alexander would not stay in the country, where there are no food supplies. Arrian reports that Arsites stated at the meeting that he would not allow even one house of his subjects to be destroyed. The Persians took the side of Arsites, suspecting Memnon of striving to prolong the war in order to receive more honors from the king (*Anab.*, I, 12, 8-10). According to the second source, "Library of History" of Diodorus Siculus, the Persian satraps and commanders, failing to prevent Alexander's crossing of the strait, began to confer about the way to wage war against him. Memnon of Rhodes, known for his wisdom in military matters, advised not to engage in battle and devastate the country, not allowing the Macedonians to move forward as they will not have anything to eat. According to the ancient author, it was proposed to transport sea and foot forces to Macedonia, transferring the war to Europe. As the historian noted, Memnon's advice did not convince the other commanders, as they found it unworthy of the arrogance (*megalopsykhia*) of the Persians. They decided to join the battle (XVII, 18, 2-4). Curtius confirms in general terms the data on this Memnon's proposal received at the beginning of the war to apply the "scorched earth" tactic against Alexander (III, 4, 3).

Before considering the features of Memnon's plan, it should be noted that such a strategy was unusual for the Greek military art of that time. This is due to the fact that during campaigns the Greek armies used to move for short distances, and the ruin of their own rural territories would do more harm to the defenders than to the attackers. A political factor also played an important role – polis citizens, who were landowners, would not vote for the ruin of their own lands (Hanson, 1998, pp. 117-118). Unlike the Greeks, the Persians were well aware of this strategy. The Scythian campaign of Darius I failed by the Persians is the most famous example of its use in antiquity. As written in the story of Herodotus, during the war with Darius the Scythians, evading an open battle, opposed a strategic retreat and the "scorched earth" tactic against the numerically superior enemy and the cavalry that attacked the

Persian foragers constantly defeated the Persian cavalry, while avoiding collisions with the infantry (IV, 120-142). Certainly, the Scythians failed to inflict a complete defeat on the Persian army (Gaebel, 2002, p. 52); however, the campaign against the Persians was generally successful for the Scythians – the exhausted Persian army had to retreat without achieving any results. If necessary, the Persian commanders used the “scorched earth” tactics. It is known from Xenophon’s *Anabasis* that two thousand horsemen of Artaxerxes II burned the terrain before the advancing Babylon army of Cyrus the Younger (*Anab.*, I, 6, 1). The Persians also had experience in the use of the “scorched earth” tactic in Asia Minor, gained during the struggle with the army of the Spartan king Agesilaus (Davis, 1964, p. 35). It is important that this technique was used several times by the Persians during their war with Alexander. Ancient historians reported that a governor of Cilicia Arsames, immediately before the battle of Issos (*Curt.*, III, 4, 1-5, 14-15; for comparison: *Arr. Anab.*, II, 4, 6), and Mazeus, on the eve of the battle of Gaugamela, burned the terrain behind Tigris on the route of the Macedonian army (*Diod.*, XVII, 55, 2; *Polyaen.*, IV, 3, 18; *Curt.*, IV, 9, 7- 8, 9, 14, 10, 11-12). As noted by Arrian, Darius III planned to try the “scorched earth” tactic when retreating from Ecbatana to Bactria (*Anab.*, III, 19, 1), but it is not known whether the Persian king could do this. Bessus tried to stop the Macedonian army in a similar way – by devastating some Bactrian territories (*Arr. Anab.*, III, 28, 8). We should agree with P. Briant, who traced the direct connection between the actions of the Persians of the times of Artaxerxes II and Darius III (2002, p. 627). An interesting situation arose: Greek Memnon proposed to the Persians the use of a well-known method and they rejected it.

The ancient critical authors are positive about the plan proposed by Memnon in Zeleia. Referring to further events, Diodorus calls his advice excellent (*arista*) (XVII, 18, 3). Recalling Memnon’s proposal when describing the military events in Cilicia, Curtius considers it as a “life-saving plan” (*salubre consilium*) (III, 4, 3). This assessment fully corresponds to their general view of the Persian command’s possibilities. In the story of Memnon’s death, Diodorus indicates that this death has ruined Darius’ plans (XVII, 29, 4). In the episode dedicated to the same event Curtius indicates that Memnon caused Alexander much anxiety. The Roman author stresses that the Macedonian king realized that in the absence of opposition from Memnon the king’s plans would be easily fulfilled (III, 1, 21). W. Tarn calls Memnon a hero of Diodorus, linking this fact with the use of a source that goes back to an unknown Greek mercenary in the Persian service; it should be noted that Curtius also referred to the same work (1948, p. 72, 105). This conclusion was thoroughly criticized by P. Brunt, who, considering the assumption of the presence of “mercenaries’ source” as erroneous, indicated that the glorification of Memnon took place both in the works of Diodorus and Curtius and in Arrian’s text (Brunt 1962, pp. 148-149). In

this case we are dealing with a common trend in ancient historiography, which is most clearly manifested in Diodorus' works. Upon its provisions, mercenaries and their commanders played a key role in the Persian king's army (Briant, 2002, pp. 790-791; Nawotka, 2010, p. 63). From these positions, the Memnon's plan rejected by the Persians was to be assessed as more reasonable and justified in comparison with the Persians' decision.

DISCUSSION

Most modern researchers evaluate the strategy proposed by Memnon as the most effective under those conditions (Bosworth, 1988, p. 40; Ferrill, 1997, p. 195; Ashley, 1998, pp. 189-190; Strauss, 2003, pp. 149-150; Lonsdale, 2007, p. 97; Worthington, 2014, p. 144). D. Engels described the advantages of Memnon's plan with most detail. According to his calculations, at the time of the landing on the Asian coast Alexander had food supplies, which were sufficient for his army for about ten days. In addition, as the researcher notes, at the time of the Macedonian invasion a new crop of cereals was still unripe, and in the event of the destruction of stocks in cities there would be no place where Alexander could replenish supplies, while the purveyance of supplies from Europe could be easily cut off because of the domination of the Persian fleet at sea. For this reason, D. Engels concluded that Memnon's plan, if implemented, would have been very effective (Engels 1978, pp. 29-30).

Why was this plan rejected, although, according to most researchers, it could help to repel Macedonian aggression? There is an assumption that Darius III did not appoint a commander-in-chief and decisions were made by the satraps and commanders in a collegial manner (Davis, 1964, p. 44; Bosworth, 1988, p. 39; Lonsdale, 2007, p. 98), although some researchers suppose that Arsites, a ruler of the region, which was a theater of military operations at that time, took a leading position in this regard (Badian, 1977, pp. 283-284; Briant, 2002, p. 821; Thompson, 2007, p. 30). In any case, both Arrian and Diodorus mention that Memnon's proposal was rejected by the majority and, according to the version of the first historian, Arsites was the main Memnon's opponent. A considerable number of specialists, relying on Arrian's text, suppose that the traditional Persians' distrust of the Greeks in general and the doubts about the honesty of Memnon's intentions were the reasons for making such a decision (Bosworth, 1988, p. 39; Ashley, 1998, p. 190; Thompson, 2007, p. 23; Heckel, 2008, p. 45; Worthington, 2014, p. 144). The possible motives of the Persian satraps also include their perception of Memnon as a political competitor (Bosworth, 1980, pp. 112-113, McCoy, 1989, pp. 428-429; Heckel, 2008, p. 45) and unwillingness to ruin the entrusted areas even in the interests of the Empire (Ferrill, 1997, p. 195; Lonsdale, 2007, p. 97; Strauss,

2003, p. 149). According to E. Badian, the key was the position of Arsites, who rejected the use of the “scorched earth” tactic in the area entrusted to the satraps and after the battle of Granicus he was considered the main culprit of the defeat (1977, p. 283).

It is impossible to understand the Persians’ choice without a comprehensive assessment of Memnon’s plan, including its controversial aspects. Comparing the data of Arrian and Diodorus, P. Brunt notes that the Persian troops that were at that time in Asia Minor did not have a large numerical superiority over the invasion army. Local peasants could not be interested in destroying their own houses and grain crops on Alexander’s way and the Persians would not have found strength to implement this intention, especially taking into account the intention to transfer some of the troops to Europe on ships. Based on such arguments, P. Brunt considers the version of Memnon’s plan set forth by Arrian as more factually accurate (1962, p. 149). S. Panovski and V. Sarakinski went even further in criticizing Memnon’s plan. They note that modern researchers, being impressed by the disasters of Napoleon’s Grande Armée in Russia, often ignore the political factor. The implementation of the plans to destroy land could lead to the loss of control over a large part of Asia Minor even without direct enemy influence. Memnon’s plan did not take into account this nuance. A note that the Persian fleet did not control Hellespont at the time of the Eastern campaign and Alexander took advantage of it, including when solving the problem of supplying the army by sea, is of particular interest. In fact, the Persian fleet approved itself only in the siege of Miletus and a complete naval blockade of the coast of Asia Minor was a prerequisite for the successful implementation of the strategy proposed by Memnon. The authors come to the conclusion that, in the best case, Memnon could aim to prolong military operations in Asia Minor, so that the main forces of the Persian army led by Darius III could meet with Alexander’s army here. Perhaps Memnon’s plan was aimed at maneuvering and depleting the enemy’s resources, including through the “scorched earth” tactic in some areas, but not on the scale indicated by ancient authors (Panovski, & Sarakinski, 2011, pp. 16-18).

All these arguments make us to take a different look at the essence of the Persians’ choice. It was clearly not only in the special ethics of the Persian aristocrats. Persian ideological attitudes did not prevent the Persians from using the “scorched earth” tactic and avoiding fighting in other cases, and doing so even during the war with Alexander (Briant, 2002, p. 822). The Persian satraps refused to resort to such actions in the specific circumstances that happened in the spring of 334 BC in Asia Minor. This region with its landscape, economic and political features was not similar to the steppe grassland of the northern Pontic area, where the Scythian strategy forced the army of Darius I to retreat. Problems inevitably arose when using the “scorched earth” tactic in Asia Minor. First of all, it was impossible to

provide a complete blockade of the supply routes of Alexander's army and this was due to the presence of the Macedonian fleet in the straits and inaction of the Persian fleet. Perhaps at the beginning of Alexander's invasion the Persian fleet was in Egypt because of participation in the suppression of the uprising headed by Khabbash (Ashley, 1998, p. 187; Briant, 2002, p.820; Nawotka, 2010, p. 115). Even the appearance of the Persian fleet in the theater of military operations has not yet guaranteed total control over shipping routes. As is known, the Persian squadron first appeared in Alexander's siege of Miletus (Arr. Anab., I, 18, 4-19, 4). However, this did not prevent the Macedonian king from later using sea vessels to deliver bread and siege machines to Halicarnassus (Diod., XVII, 24, 1). We agree with the thesis that in the spring of 334 BC the Persians would obviously have not had strength to completely isolate the conqueror's troops in Asia Minor and transfer war to Europe. Military benefits from the implementation of the plan were illusory, while the political consequences could be catastrophic, especially in the situation that prevailed in Asia Minor. First of all, the "Great satraps' revolt" was recently suppressed here: the region was economically weakened and a strategically important area of the Hellespont Strait was poorly controlled (Weiskopf, 1989, p. 95). The control over the Asian Minor Greek cities was the most significant problem. Most of the local Greeks had natural sympathy for their European counterparts (Davis, 1964, p. 36). The implementation of Memnon's plan actually doomed the inhabitants of western Asia Minor to hunger and certainly could force them to make a choice in favor of Alexander.

An interesting assumption made by P. Briant questioned the fact that the Persian satraps had the option of choosing a strategy in the beginning of the war. According to this researcher, the Persians' refusal to use the "scorched earth" tactic was due to the order of the king to defeat Alexander's army in an open pitched battle with the forces of the troops of Asian Minor satraps. This was in accordance with the usual Achaemenid practice (Briant, 2002, pp. 822- 823). This assumption is partly based on Justin's message, according to which confident Darius III decided not to resort to tricks that can steal victory, not to repel the enemy from the borders, but lure it into the heart of the country in order to drive the enemy out of the country in a more glorious way. This explains the fact that the first battle took place in the plain of Adraste (XI, 6, 9-10). P. Briant's conclusion is rather interesting; however, the possible interest of Darius III in the rapid destruction of the conquerors' army in the open pitched battle should be connected not with the general Persian military practice, which did not prevent from using the "scorched earth" tactic in other circumstances, but with a specific political situation. Darius III, like Alexander, became king in 336 BC and took over the throne by means of the intrigues of influential Bagoas. Certainly, the information about possible

political turmoil in Babylonia during the period of Darius III's accession to the throne is extremely vague, but the change of the monarch should naturally lead to certain power vacuum in the country, which continued until the heir got enthroned (Llewellyn-Jones, 2013, pp. 143 -144). In this regard, the Persian ideology of the time should be mentioned. According to this ideology, the king was chosen by the gods to protect the land and people from the destructive actions of the enemy troops, from crop failure and famine (Briant, 1999, p. 111). Darius III should have proved to be an assertive and strong ruler, who is able to provide control over the lands of the Empire. Satraps were directly responsible for the protection of royal possessions and this principle undoubtedly influenced their attitude to Memnon's plan (Gehrke, 1996, p. 36). Even if P. Briant's hypothesis of the direct order of Darius III to the Asian Minor governors is erroneous, in any case the satraps should have been afraid of dissatisfying the Great King.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the Persian satraps and commanders had every reason to be skeptical of Memnon's plan, the implementation of which would cause significant risks for the Persian positions in the region, not providing significant guarantees of success. On the other hand, there were weighty political reasons for attempting to defeat the Macedonian army in the land battle. As a result, the satraps' army met with Alexander's army on the banks of the Granicus River and was defeated. As rightly pointed out by A.M. Devine, the first victory over the Persians gave the Macedonian king a foothold in Asia and opened the way deep into the Achaemenid Empire, becoming the stone in the foundation of Alexander's "world power" (Devine 1986, p. 277). However, no matter how significant the consequences of the victory of the battle of Granicus were, the conqueror's struggle with the main forces of the Persian army was yet to come. The defeat of the satraps' army in the battle of Granicus cannot be regarded as a fatal defeat of the Persian Empire, and the refusal to use the "scorched earth" tactic at the very beginning of the struggle for domination of the Achaemenid land should not be taken as a fateful mistake of the Persians. However, an issue of the practical implementation of separate components of Memnon's plan and, above all, the use of the "scorched earth" tactic during the main phase of the war between Alexander and Darius III remained outside the scope of this work. This issue requires further study.

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