

An Assessment of Tissaphernes and Cyrus' Peloponnesian War Diplomacy

This paper will focus on Persian diplomatic activity in the Aegean during the period from 413 to 404 B.C., when Darius II tasked his satraps in the region with involvement in the Peloponnesian War. The focus will be on the activities of Tissaphernes, satrap of Lydia at the outset of Persian intervention in the war in 413, and Cyrus, son of Darius II, sent to Ionia in 408 to manage the Persian war effort.

While the significance of Cyrus' partnership with Lysander has been given some attention by scholars, substantial analysis of Cyrus and Tissaphernes' varying success in diplomatic relations and their wider impacts on the Persians' war effort tends to be overlooked. I will argue that Tissaphernes' overall disposition, worsened by ongoing financial frustrations and aristocratic competition, resulted in diplomatic missteps that exacerbated difficulties in meeting Darius II's aims for the war. In contrast, Cyrus' propensity for building interpersonal relationships allowed him to more effectively manage the war effort, even in the face of financial or diplomatic struggles.

When Thucydides first introduces Tissaphernes, he portrays him as an active, generous ally. Presuming that the war was nearing its end, Tissaphernes promised considerable payments to the Spartans, hoping that he could take the credit for bringing about Sparta's victory and thus increase his standing with the king over his rival satrap Pharnabazos. However, as the war dragged on for an unexpectedly long time, Tissaphernes' ability to provide aid – taken from his own personal funds – began to diminish. The resulting decision to cut the rate of wages paid to Peloponnesian sailors by fifty percent would prove detrimental to Tissaphernes' reputation among the Greeks (Thuc. 8.29.1). Tissaphernes stated that he first had to consult with the king

before continuing to pay the full rate. Immediately, however, one of the commanders protested, upon which Tissaphernes agreed to a slight increase (Thuc. 8.29.2). While willing to make concessions, Tissaphernes demonstrates far less generosity and eagerness than his eventual successor would when confronted with similar situations.

Despite various attempts to make good on his promises and to repair his reputation among his allies, the impact of Tissaphernes' personality on his diplomatic relations becomes apparent. In Cnidos, Tissaphernes met with Spartan commissioners to discuss past grievances and how to move forward. The Spartans refused to acknowledge past treaties that they felt had extended Persia's reach too far. Rather than draft a new one as he was invited to do, Tissaphernes stormed out of the meeting, bringing negotiations to a standstill (Thuc. 8.43.2-4).

By 408 or 407, Tissaphernes' struggles had hindered the war effort enough that Darius felt it necessary to replace him, sending his son Cyrus as the new satrap of Lydia. Upon his first meetings with the Spartan admiral Lysander, Cyrus was already demonstrating his greater capacity for diplomacy. Declaring his willingness to exhaust his own funds to aid the Spartans, his allies asked him to raise their pay to Tissaphernes' original rate. Though unable to do this without Darius' permission, when he offered Lysander a personal favor and Lysander implored him to raise the wages slightly, Cyrus gladly complied (Xen. *Hell.* 1.5.3-7). Beyond merely displaying greater generosity than his predecessor, Cyrus also attempted to present himself in terms that would be more appealing to his Greek allies. While showing Lysander his *paradeisos*, Cyrus impressed the admiral through his athleticism and self-reliance despite still displaying the ostentatious luxury many Greeks associated with Persian nobles (Xen. *Oik.* 4.20-25).

These differences between Tissaphernes and Cyrus' approaches to diplomacy, I argue, account for their varying degrees of success with the Spartans. Cyrus showed the ability to

approach relations with his Greek allies on terms they would be more familiar with, attempting to appeal to their cultural considerations without entirely foregoing his own. In comparison, while Tissaphernes did face difficulties beyond his control in trying to fulfill Darius' war aims, he ultimately exacerbated problems for both himself and Darius. Even while trying to undo the damages his financial difficulties had done to his reputation among the Greeks, Tissaphernes displayed an unwillingness to place helping his allies above his own competition with Pharnabazos, as well as a disposition that did not lend itself to successful diplomatic relations.

Bibliography

Hobden, Fiona. "Xenophon's Oeconomicus." In *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon*, edited by Michael A. Flower. 152–73. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Hyland, John O. *Persian Interventions: The Achaemenid Empire, Athens, and Sparta, 450-386 BCE*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.

Kagan, Donald. *The Fall of the Athenian Empire*. Cornell University Press, 2013.

Lewis, David M. *Sparta and Persia*. Brill, 1977.

Westlake, H. D. "Tissaphernes in Thucydides." *The Classical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1985): 43–54.