

The Assassination of Tissaphernes

According to ancient sources, Achaemenid King Artaxerxes II ordered the beheading of Tissaphernes, satrap of Lydia and Caria, following the defeat of his forces outside of Sardis by Agesilaus of Sparta in 395 BCE (Xenophon *Hellenica* 3.4.25; Diodorus 14.80; Plutarch *Artaxerxes* 23.1-2; Nepos *Conon* 3-4; Polyaeus 7.16.1). Minor disagreements over the specific reasoning behind the execution order aside, modern scholars accept that it was given without question (e.g., Westlake 1981; Briant 2002: 638; Ruzicka 2012: 51-52). Yet, if true, the fate of Tissaphernes would be exceptional in Achaemenid history: there is no record of a summary execution of another satrap or general for military failure. In this paper, I argue instead that Tissaphernes was not killed with the permission of the King, but assassinated by political rivals.

In all likelihood, word of Tissaphernes' death first reached Greek ears when the Persian official responsible for it, Tithraustes, directly thereafter met with Agesilaus to negotiate a truce. This was also when Xenophon, an officer in Agesilaus' army and author of our lone extant contemporary account of the satrap's death, would have learned of it. Despite Tissaphernes' long record of loyal service for two Achaemenid kings (Thucydides 8.28; Briant 2002: 630-631), Xenophon often portrays him as duplicitous and ineffectual in both his *Anabasis* and *Hellenica* (Pownall 1998; Bassett 2002; Danzig 2007). Thus the original source of Tissaphernes' death was the satrap's killer himself, whose version of events quickly reached an author with personal and literary reasons for uncritically accepting it.

Post-contemporary sources, though not without their own inconsistencies and historical errors, do agree on some elements that are both absent from the *Hellenica* and reminiscent more of illicit assassination than sanctioned execution: Tissaphernes was never formally arrested, but was lured away from Sardis by Tithraustes and killed by local political rivals while bathing.

Xenophon's omission of these complicating details is revealing; their appearance in later accounts points to the existence of a rival fourth-century narrative – probably the *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia* (Gray 1979) – and, in turn, of uncertainty regarding the circumstances of Tissaphernes' death in its immediate aftermath.

Where the ancient accounts suffer from confusion, questionable sources, and prejudiced motives, the weight of comparative evidence leans strongly against the plausibility of execution. The figure whose experience parallels that of Tissaphernes most closely is Tiribazus, who was commissioned by Artaxerxes II to suppress rebellion on Cyprus in the mid-380s. As with Tissaphernes, the King received accusations of treason when his campaign stalled, but Tiribazus was arrested, brought to court, and allowed to defend himself. He was judged both by his conduct on the campaign in question and by the value of his previous work. Recognizing his long career of faithful service, the King acquitted Tiribazus, admitted him into the royal entourage as an advisor, and promised him the hand of his daughter in marriage (Diodorus 15.8-11; Plutarch *Artaxerxes* 27.4.).

Tissaphernes had a similar record of service and his arrest likewise followed a relatively minor setback in the midst of a protracted military campaign. Given his personal history, it is difficult to understand why the King would in this specific instance take the unprecedented step of ordering his death without trial. Tithraustes and his co-conspirators, perhaps also shrewdly recognizing that their rival would be unlikely to remain outside of the King's favor for long, made their move after the defeat at Sardis, when both the means and opportunity arose. For these reasons, it is more plausible to understand the satrap's death as an assassination than an execution, contrary to the assertions of our ancient sources.

Bibliography

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