

Who Succeeded Xerxes on the Throne of Persia?

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A standard interpretation of ancient Persian history in the mid-5th century B.C. is that Artaxerxes I followed his father on the throne after Xerxes was murdered. This interpretation has been developed from the classical writers, the king lists, and the datelines on contract tables from Babylonia which follow this order. Since there is a late Hellenistic astronomical text which dates the murder of Xerxes in the fifth Persian-Babylonian month, or August, the transition between these two kings has been dated in the summer of 465 B.C., about forty days before the Jewish New Year of 1 Tishri. If the Jews, like Ezra, used a fall-to-fall calendar and accession year reckoning, those forty days would have served as Artaxerxes' accession period or Year 0, and his first full year of reign would have begun on 1 Tishri in 465 B.C. That would also make his seventh year extend from the fall of 459 to the fall of 458, not from the fall of 458 to the fall of 457, as Adventist interpreters have held.

But this problem is complicated by two factors. First, there was the political turmoil after the murder of Xerxes. Second, there is the lack of any sources dated to Artaxerxes in the last half of 465 B.C.

The Artaxerxes sources can be reviewed as follows:

1. Persian sources. The earliest tablets from Persepolis date to the third and fourth month of Artaxerxes' first year, or June and July of 464 B.C.¹

2. Babylonian sources. The earliest texts dated to Artaxerxes in Babylonia came from Nippur and Borsippa and they both date to the seventh month of his first year, or October of 464 B.C.²

3. Egyptian sources. The problem is even more difficult in Egypt, where an Aramaic papyrus written on Jan. 2, 464 B.C. is double dated to the accession

¹ Parker and Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.–A.D. 75* (Providence: Brown U, 1956), 17.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

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year of Artaxerxes and year 21 of Xerxes.³ In this case the regnal year of Xerxes was artificially prolonged after his death in August because of irregularities in the succession. Since Horn has documented that the Jews at Elephantine were using a fall-to-fall calendar, it is of interest that the date in Artaxerxes' reign is his accession year, not his first year, as would have been the case if he came to the throne before 1 Tishri.

This unusual dating is confirmed by Manetho, the Egyptian chronographer of the second century B.C., who places a seven month reign for Artabanus in between Xerxes and Artaxerxes.⁴

4. Summary of the chronological sources. From this survey of Egyptian, Persian, and Babylonian sources, it is evident that there are no dated texts to the accession of Artaxerxes from the last half of 465 B.C., after the murder of Xerxes. The earliest dated texts from these three areas come from Egypt, where his accession year is mentioned in January of 464 B.C. This first regnal year is then mentioned in Persia in the summer of 464, and his first year is also mentioned in the fall of 464 in Babylonia.

There are two possible explanation for this phenomenon. First it may simply be an accident of preservation (or non-preservation). After Xerxes' suppression of the revolt in Babylon, texts from that region become less frequent.

On the other hand, this absence may have stemmed from the course of political events in the Persian Empire after the murder of Xerxes. Those events require a more detailed explanation.

Ancient Sources for the Events of Late 465 B.C.

Our main source for the events in this period is Ctesius. He was a Greek physician who served at the court of Artaxerxes II, the grandson of Artaxerxes I. He lived in Persia, spoke the language, and had access to official records of the palace. His account is as follows.⁵

With the aid of a palace chamberlain Artabanus, a powerful courtier, murdered Xerxes. Xerxes had an older son and heir named Darius. Artabanus accused Darius of his father's murder to Artaxerxes, the younger son, and with his support he executed Darius. He intended to do the same thing to Artaxerxes, but Artaxerxes beat him to the punch. Informed by Megabyzus of Artabanus' plot, Artaxerxes put Artabanus to death, along with three of his sons, who were killed in a battle after their father was executed. The province of Bactria then revolted against Artaxerxes, but after two victories in battle the king put down that revolt.⁶

³ S. H. Horn and L. H. Wood, *The Chronology of Ezra 7* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald), 135–138).

⁴ Neuffer, 68.

⁵ Reviewed by Neuffer, 64–65).

⁶ Ctesius, *Persica* (summary by Photius, Brussels, 1947), 33–35.

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Diodorus of Sicily (1st century B.C.) tells much the same story: Xerxes was murdered by Artabanus, who then blamed the murder on Darius, and he offered the help of the king's bodyguard to Artaxerxes to punish his brother. After disposing of the older brother, Artabanus set his sights on the younger brother when "he saw his plan was prospering." Artaxerxes, however, dealt him a fatal blow and "took over the kingship." Diodorus dates these events according to the Roman system, in the last half of 464 B.C.⁷

The third classical historian who refers to these events is Trogus Pompeius (1st century B.C. to 1st century A.D.). He says that Artaxerxes, learning of the treachery of Artabanus, ordered the troops out for review. The young king asked Artabanus to exchange garments with him on that occasion, and when he did so and was unarmed, Artaxerxes stabbed him to death.⁸

To a considerable extent, Diodorus and Trogus Pompeius owe their accounts to Ctesias or similar sources, but they also add their own details.

Persian Royal Propaganda

It should be noted carefully that Ctesias was not an eye-witness to these events, but heard them as reported to him two generations later, filtered through the family of Artaxerxes. They were not impartial observers, and they wanted to make Artaxerxes look as good as possible and Artabanus and Darius look as bad as possible. This was a standard technique exercised by many ancient kings, including Persians. Note, for example, Darius I's justification on the Behistun Inscription for taking over the kingship of Persia after the death of Cambyses, and Cyrus' justification for the conquest of Babylon on his Clay Barrel inscription.⁹ Thus, while there is undoubtedly a kernel of historical truth in what each of these three writers reports, their records have been filtered through a view favorable to Artaxerxes. We need to get down to a deeper level of the account in an attempt to detect what really happened.

Major Discrepancies

The three sources agree that Artabanus murdered Xerxes. That set in motion the events described above. The question then is who took the throne after the death of Xerxes? The answer is obvious: it was the older son Darius who was crown prince and heir to the throne. Artaxerxes was the younger son and not in line for the throne. Ctesias' sources wished to minimize this point, but in actu-

⁷ Diodorus Siculus, xi.69.1–6, xi.71.1 (Leob Classical Library), IV, 304–307, 308–309.

⁸ Transmitted by Justinus Frontinus, *History of the World Extracted From Trogus Pompeius*, xiii.1 in John Selby Watson, trans., Justin Cornelius Nepos, and Entropius (London, 1876), 37–38. I owe this and the previous two references to Neuffer, 64–66.

⁹ This penchant for propaganda among the early Persian kings has recently been reviewed well by S. Douglas Waterhouse in his excellent article, "Why Was Darius the Mede Expunged From History?" in *To Understand the Scriptures*, ed. D. Merling (Berrien Springs, MI: Horn Archaeological Museum of Andrews U, 1997), 173–190).

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ality that is the course that events naturally would have taken and undoubtedly did take. Ctesias' sources did not want to admit that Darius became king before Artaxerxes, because that would have reflected badly upon Artaxerxes.

What happened next was that Artabanus went to the younger son to accuse the older son of the murder of his father which he, Artabanus, had actually carried out. The position of the two sons should be noted carefully. Darius was the older son who had taken the throne. Artaxerxes was the younger son whose status as a prince had not yet changed.

This was not a case of accusing one brother to another brother. This was a case of accusing the present king to his younger brother who was still a prince. What was really going on here was a plot to assassinate the then-ruling king. The plot was hatched by Artabanus and readily entered into by Artaxerxes, for then he could see how he could take the kingship away from his brother. This was not a legitimate exercise of the kingship by Artaxerxes, but a plot into which he entered willingly as a means of taking the kingship away from his brother. Darius, not Artaxerxes, was the legitimate king who came to the throne after Xerxes.

From Artabanus' viewpoint, the plot backfired. He had killed Xerxes. He had killed Darius. He planned to kill Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes could see the direction these events were moving. He was the only remaining obstacle to Artabanus placing himself on the throne, which clearly was Artabanus' intent. In this battle of kill or be killed, Artaxerxes won out.

A New King Darius

Previously the following kings by the name of Darius are known to have occupied the throne of the Persian Empire:

- (1) Darius I Hystaspes (522–486 B.C.),
- (2) Darius II Nothus (423–404 B.C.), and
- (3) Darius III Codomanus (336–330 B.C.).

Not including the Darius the Mede of the book of Daniel, we now need to add a fourth to the line of Persian rulers: Darius the son of Xerxes. Since both Darius II and III ruled after him, their designations need to be extended to Darius III and IV.

How long did this older son of Xerxes rule after his father's death in August of 464 B.C.? Two or three months would be a useful estimate. He certainly ruled less than five months, since Artaxerxes was recognized as king in Egypt by January of 464 B.C. Since he did not live until the spring New Year in 464 B.C., he would only have had an accession year by Persian-Babylonian reckoning, and he did not live to begin his first full regnal year.

It may be objected here that we have no direct inscriptional evidence for his reign. It is based only on an inference from information from Ctesius, Diodorus, and Trogon Pompeius. But the same is also true of any accession period of Artaxerxes I, late in 465 B.C. The inference from the classical writers is also more

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direct for Darius than it is for Artaxerxes, since those authors recognize Darius as the older son of Xerxes and heir to the throne. Since he lived after the death of Xerxes until he was slain by Artabanus, he, and not Artaxerxes, should have been king for at least some portion of the latter half of 465 B.C.

Potential Contract Tablet Evidences

An objection noted above is that there is not, to the present, contemporary inscriptional evidence for Darius the son of Xerxes as king. There may have been some, but it may have been covered up by Artabanus or Artaxerxes, or both. Since he may have ruled for only a brief time, it may not have been difficult to have covered those tracks. On the other hand, evidence for his brief reign may exist among the contract tablets of Babylonia. They could be sorted out in the following way. These ordinary business documents make no distinction between which Darius they were inscribed under: Darius I, II, or III; Darius Hystaspes, Nothus, or Codomanus. These additional designations were not used in the datelines on these tablets. They only gave the day, month, and regnal year with the name Darius and the royal title, "King of Lands."

Tablets from the reign of Darius III, the king conquered by Alexander, are virtually non-existent. It is up to the historian, therefore, to sort out the tablets dated to a Darius "King of Lands" to see whether they belong to Darius I, Darius II, or now, Darius the son of Xerxes. One need only check the tablets from the accession year to look for this additional Darius, since he was assassinated before his first regnal year. Various collections of these tablets and their catalogues have been published. I have listed a number of them in two early studies.¹⁰

Once the appropriately dated tablets are located, they need to be assigned to the appropriate Darius by a study of the personal names in texts. Since the accession years of these three rulers named Darius were, respectively, 522, 465, and 423 B.C., there should be no significant overlap between their personnel, and they can be related to persons in other texts from those times.

It may be that even following this procedure no texts dated to Darius the son of Xerxes would be found because this course of events may have only been known in Persia, and word of it may not have reached Babylonia. On the other hand, the evidence may be there and not have been recognized previously for what it is. Outside of the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, texts from ancient Persia are not as common as they are from Babylonia.

Summary

The preferable way to read Ctesius, Diodorus, and Trogus Pompeius is to take Darius, the older son and heir to the throne of Xerxes, as having actually

¹⁰ "An Unrecognized Vassal King of Babylon in the Early Achaemenid Period," pts. I and II, *AUSS* 9 (1971): 51–67, 100–128.

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ascended to the position of king after the death of his father. His brief reign was cut short, however, in a plot launched against him by Artabanus and his younger brother Artaxerxes. In the struggle for power after Darius' death, Artaxerxes won out and Artabanus was vanquished. Artaxerxes, a young king, went on to reign for the next forty years, down to 423 B.C.

How long did Darius reign between Xerxes and Artaxerxes? Undoubtedly, not very long, but if his brief reign took up only as little as six weeks in August or September, that would have put the accession of Artaxerxes after 1 Tishri according to the Jewish fall-to-fall calendar. According to this kind of reckoning, that means that his first full regnal year would have extended from the fall of 464 to the fall of 463, and his seventh year from the fall of 458 to the fall of 457. Whatever the precise course of events that occurred during this troubled time, it is reasonable to estimate the chronological course described here. The lack of documentation during the latter months of 465 B.C. may not be just an accident of (non-)discovery, but could have occurred because of a royal cover-up by Artaxerxes. That was the point of view from which Ctesius and the other classical writers received their stories.

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