

ALEXANDER IN IRAN

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In his *Ancient Persia* (I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 1996, (pp. 105-7), Wiesehoffer notes that Alexander had presented his invasion of Persia as an attempt to avenge Xerxes' invasion of Greece; but his real aim of establishing his own sovereignty in the regions between Greece and India only gradually dawned on them.

“What a number of people found quite incomprehensible were his efforts to seek support and acknowledgment from the Iranians themselves by passing himself off as the avenger of the murdered Darius, by adopting Iranian customs and usages, wearing local clothes, establishing native military units, marrying Iranian princesses and entrusting members of the Iranian aristocracy with functions in his own entourage or in the satrapies.” Wiesehoffer finds that this “Achaemenid trend” of Alexander's, did not occur to him suddenly after the death of Darius, as commonly believed so far but it dawned on him on his arrival in the Achaemenid territory. According to his historians Alexander was not only quite familiar with the rules for the Achaemenid king's legitimacy, but also did everything to start fulfilling them himself one by one. In Asia Minor he presented himself as the defender of peace and order, and in his correspondence with Darius after the battle of Issus he even declared himself a pretender to the Achaemenid throne.” He summoned Darius to fight for his sovereignty (as befitted an Achaemenid king), took care of the soldiers and the royal Achaemenid household, accused Darius of having unlawfully ascended the throne, i.e., of being an illegitimate king, and attributed his own success to the will of the gods, by which he could only mean the divine protectors of the empire and of the Achaemenid ‘family.’”

I see the need to quote Wiesehoffer's deductive observations at length here to avoid any charge of partiality on my part: “The appeal of Persian kingship to men with great ambitions such as Alexander (and perhaps even Philip) has often been pointed out. It was based on its attribution to one family, its concept of divine election and representation, its claim to world domination, its idea of a special relationship between sovereign and subjects, and its pre-eminent position with respect to the aristocracy. Alexander's stay in Persis was also proof of his effort not to mark an ‘interruption’ in the reign of his predecessors, but by recognizing Persian grandeur and observing the country's traditions, to win over to his side the Persian aristocracy and the population as a whole. That was why he made a point of his personal presence here in the heart of the empire (which Darius had already abandoned), and it was also why he honoured Cyrus and openly

emulated him and his policies; while by burning down parts of the Persepolis terrace, he sought to obliterate the memory of Xerxes and also to prevent potential rivals from taking possession of the valuable objects and treasures accumulated there. The fact that the fire in the residence was interpreted by the Greeks as a victorious end to the punitive expedition, while to the natives it meant that their only advantage lay in a compromise with the victor, perfectly suited Alexander's purposes."

The assassination of Darius by Bessus also helped Alexander to gain support in Iran. By honouring Darius IV and by declaring him as his predecessor, Alexander was now able to present himself as the avenger of Darius. Thus when his rival Bessus proclaimed himself King Artaxerxes (IV), he resorted to Persian court ceremonies for having Bessus executed according to Persian customs, although he antagonized the Macedonians in his camp and was not able to prevent opposition to his reign in eastern Iran. After the debacle in Gedrosia, he temporarily faced resistance also in Persis itself. "Only inexorable brutality and ruthlessness helped him to victory, though the must also have led to his bad reputation in Iran's Zoroastrian tradition." Tensions eased up somewhat as a result of his avowed disapproval of setting Perspolis on fire and his satrap Peucestas' adroit efforts for showing affinity with the Persians by wearing Persian clothes, learning the Persian language and adopting Persian customs and successfully seeking cooperation of the Persian aristocracy.

Thanks to Peucestas' efforts Persis remained calm after Alexander's death even though there was unrest in other parts of the empire starting before or shortly after Alexander's death.