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Aristagoras of Miletus

Summary :

Tyrant of Miletus (511/510-494 B.C.). He tried unsuccessfully to conquer Naxos and he was the main instigator for the Greek revolt in Ionia.

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH

Miletus (?)

DATE AND PLACE OF DEATH

Shortly after 494 BC-Thrace (?)

MAIN ROLE

Tyrant

1. Family - Connections with the Persian Aristocracy

Aristagoras was nephew and son-in-law of [Histiaios](#), tyrant of [Miletus](#). When Miletus came to its highest degree of prosperity, being the "jewel of [Ionia](#)" after two generations of political trouble, Aristagoras held the supreme office in the name of Histiaios, who was granted the honorary position of counsellor at Susa and in fact forced to stay in [Darius](#)' palace since 511-510 B.C.¹

2. The Siege of Naxos

At the end of the 6th century, refugees from [Naxos](#) went to Miletus, expelled from their own city at the end of sedition. They received Aristagoras' hospitality and asked him some help to re-conquer the power in Naxos. Aristagoras thought that it could be a marvellous opportunity to master himself the island. He accepted his hosts' request, telling them that he should ask first the support of the Persian satrap of Sardis, his friend [Artaphernes I](#).² Aristagoras went to [Sardis](#) and exposed his project to Artaphernes, promising him to conquer Naxos and the surrounding islands. Artaphernes agreed and gave him two hundreds ships, with the assentiment of Darius in Susa. Megabates commanded the Persian fleet and took with him Aristagoras and the Naxian refugees.³

A dispute between the two commanders in chief nevertheless caused the failure of the expedition. Before sailing against Naxos, the fleet stopped in [Chios](#).⁴ During a routine inspection of the fleet, Megabates found nobody guarding the Myndian vessel and punished severely the commander Skylax. Aristagoras took it as an offence to a friend and delivered the enchained Skylax. As a reprisal, Megabates sent in secret men warning the Naxians of what would happen soon. Informed of the imminent attack, they fortified their walls and collected goods inside the citadel to support a long siege. Arriving in front of the city of Naxos, Aristagoras began a siege that lasted four months, after what the fleet sailed back to Ionia.⁵

3. The Revolt Against the Persians

Having failed to conquer in the name of Darius and the Persian satrap of Sardis the island of Naxos and the surrounding Cyclades, Aristagoras sought that his personal failure could be fatal to him, fearing to lose his lordship of Miletus. So, according to [Herodotus](#), he would have conceived to launch a [revolt](#) against the Persians. It was at this critical moment according to Herodotus, that Aristagoras received from the mainland a message of Histiaios that completed to decide him for action.⁶ The following folk-tale is well known.⁷ For Histiaios disliked his enforced sojourn at Susa, he hoped that if there was a revolt he would be sent away to his home city. Wishing to signify to Aristagoras that he should revolt but fearing that his messenger could divulge the secret, he shaved and picked marks on the head of his trustiest slave. As soon as the hair was grown, he sent the man to Miletus with no other order than to have his hair shaven and his head examined by Aristagoras. With Histiaios' incitement and the agreement of his fellow Ionian tyrants, Aristagoras revolted. Only [Hecataeus](#) repressed the way of the war against the Great King, but nobody listened to his wise proposition.



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First, Aristagoras renounced to his tyranny in Miletos and set up an isonomic regime. The other Ionian cities abolished tyranny and expelled their tyrants.⁸ In need of help and of a strong support abroad, Aristagoras sailed to Sparta.⁹ Bringing with him the first geographical map, he exposed to King Cleomenes the situation of his fellow Ionians submitted to Persian rule. He tried to convince Cleomenes of the weakness of the Persian army and engaged the Spartans to chase them to their capital. For Susa was full of wealth and could be an attractive aim for the Spartans, Aristagoras encouraged them to postpone their struggles against Messenians, Arcadians and Argians. After three days of reflection, Cleomenes inquired himself of the distance between the Ionian coast and Susa. Aristagoras answered that three month's walk was necessary to an army to reach the Great King's capital. In fear of going so far away from the sea, Cleomenes rejected Aristagoras' fallacious proposition. The emprovement of the latter and the promise of 50 talents were without any consequence on Cleomenes' decision.

Leaving Sparta, Cleomenes went to Athens where the tyrants had just been expelled.¹⁰ Hippias sought refuge at the [court of Darius](#) and convinced the Persians to threaten the Athenians. So there was in Athens at this moment, if we trust Herodotus, an emergent anti-Persian feeling.¹¹ Aristagoras spoke in front of the Assembly, arguing about the wealth of Asia and the weakness of the Persian army, but also reminding that the Milesians were descendants of Athenian colons. The Athenians were persuaded, voted the sending of twenty ships to Ionia and set Melanthios at the head of the expedition. According to Herodotus, this decision was the source of all the troubles between Greeks and Barbarians.

When the Athenian fleet arrived in Miletus, five Eretrian vessels were with them because the Milesians once supported them in the war against Chalcis. Aristagoras decided to attack Sardis but did not want to participate himself to the expedition. So the Ionian and Athenian army went inland and burned the city of Artaphernes the Satrap, except the Acropolis which was naturally well defended and protected by a strong contingent. After this raid, the Greek army took refuge in [Ephesus](#) but was soon defeated by the Persians. Athenians sailed back home and left to the Ionian the conflict they had launched.¹² Ionia was in fire, struggles between Greeks and Persians arose everywhere and Aristagoras was the prime responsible. According to Herodotus, he was a coward.¹³ Hecataeus argued in favour of fortifying the Leros Island, from which they could easily return to Miletus after the repression. But Aristagoras and his friends preferred to fled far away from Miletus and Ionia and to settle in Myrkinos, the Thracian city Histiaios once received from Darius. There he died in a battle against the Thracians.

Many debates have been conducted on Aristagoras' and Histiaios' reasons of the Ionian Revolt, for which we are totally dependent on Herodotus account.¹⁴ For we must keep in mind the deep bias of Herodotus against the Ionians in general, but also against Histiaios and Aristagoras, whose motives are reduced to personal desires. Actually, problems even remain on the exact chronology of the events and Herodotus' silence on the economic, social and effective political situation of Ionian cities under Persian rules does not help historians to explain the uprising of all the West coast of Asia Minor.

1. Hdt 5.23-24

2. Hdt 5.30

3. Hdt 5.31-32

4. Hdt 5.33

5. Hdt 5.34

6. Hdt 5.35

7. Aen. *Tact.* 31.28-29; Polyæn. 1.24; Gell. 17.9.19-27



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8. Hdt 5.36-38

9. Hdt 5.49-51

10. Hdt 5.97

11. Hdt 5.96

12. Hdt 5.99-103

13. Hdt 5.124-126

14. See the impressive but indeed selected bibliography of Briant, P., *Histoire de l'Empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre* (Paris 1996) p. 932-933.

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Glossary :

	talent, the
Numismatic weight unit. The silver talent equaled 60 mnai or 6000 silver drachmas.	
	tyrant, the
The initial meaning of the term was the leading archon of a noble origin. Later on he was the usurper of rightful power and the one who was ruling in an absolute way, aiming ostensibly to the welfare of his people.	

SOURCES

Herodotus, 5.23-24, 5.30-38, 5.49-51, 5.97.