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Greeks incorporated in the Achaemenid nobility

Summary :

From Cyrus the Great to Darius III many Greeks, as well as other indigenous aristocrats, gained royal favors, were appointed by the Great kings or stand at the service of Persian satraps – although not all of them could be counted as real aristocrats, and they had no share in the political power. This policy was part of a political strategy to smooth off the relations with the submitted nations.

Date

6th c. BC - 4th c. BC

Geographical Location

Achaemenid empire

1. The administration of the Persian Empire

Following the campaigns of Cyrus II (558-530 B.C.), Cambyses II (530-522 B.C.), and [Darius I](#) (522-486 B.C.), the Persian Empire soon expanded far beyond the limits of the Elamite kingdom, from Macedonia to the Indus River and from Scythia to Egypt. Such a great empire needed a lot of trustworthy men to govern the conquered countries. As it becomes clear from [Herodotus](#),¹ the army was totally under Persian or Median command. The general officers were men totally devoted to the king, both in the infantry and the navy. Moreover, many of them were closely related to him by family ties. **Satraps**, governors of submitted land, were all Persians, with no exception under Cyrus I (610-585 B.C.) and Cambyses I (585 – 559 B.C.). Throughout the empire, land and people were administrated by members of great Persian families of aristocratic or royal lineage. They formed a hegemonic group, which Pierre Briant labels the “dominant ethno-class”.²

2. Persian policy and local elites

Considering the extent of the Empire and the proportionally small number of nobly born Persians, military control of territories and populations was only part of the response to the conquest. Conquerors must avoid the upspring of revolts and so tried to gain the support of the local elite in each submitted country. The Persian kings promoted a strategy of collaboration between the Persian high-administration and the locally mighty men. Therefore, the Persians allowed the Bactrian, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Carian, Greek, etc. aristocrats to take part in the management of the Empire. By winning over the adhesion of the local elite and by allowing them to keep their dominant position in their country, the Persians hoped to rule quietly their huge empire or, at least, to smooth off the relations with the submitted nations. However, local elites were generally not appointed to decision-taking offices at the top of the hierarchy but remained confined to executive tasks. The king granted them special honors, and sometimes recognized them the position of royal counsellors, although they still remained inferior to the dominant Persian aristocracy. They collaborated with the Persians but had no share in the political power.

3. Greek commanders and officials in the Persian Empire

In Greek Asia Minor, many people took advantage of the Persian conquest and administration. J. Hofstetter³ listed about 350 Greeks from Cyrus the Great (558 – 530 B.C.) to [Darius III](#) (336 – 330 B.C.) who were appointed by the Great Kings or stand at the service of Persian satraps — although not all of them could be counted as real aristocrats (for example, the doctor Demokedes of Croton). Greeks, like other local aristocrats, had many opportunities to gain royal favors. For instance, because he once gave a purple coat to Darius during the Egyptian campaign of Cambyses II (530-522 B.C.), Syloson later obtained to be established tyrant of [Samos](#), when the new Great King Darius I (522-486 B.C.) had conquered it.⁴ According to Herodotus,⁵ due to their courage during the battle of Salamina, Theomnestor and Phylakos of Samos were granted special honors by [Xerxes I](#) (486-465 B.C.). Theomnestor was established **tyrant** of the Samians and Phylakos, being now compted among the King's benefactors, received an estate.



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3.1. Rewards for military service

Military operations personally led by the king are studied by modern historians in order to understand the opportunities presented and the honors granted to Greek aristocrats who contributed to the success of royal campaigns. In ca. 513 BC, Darius I decided to submit the Scythians and started the first [Persian expedition](#) against European lands. In order to cross the Bosphorus with his army, Darius ordered the construction of a bridge. The architect responsible for the task was Mandrocles of Samos, who was probably granted an estate by the king.⁶ Darius took with him a contingent of soldiers from Hellespontic, Aeolian and Ionian cities. With 600 vessels, they sailed with Darius' army for two days up the Danube River, where they built a bridge to allow the Persian army to enter Scythian lands. Having crossed the bridge with his troops, Darius first sought to destroy it but Coes, leader of the [Mytilenian](#) contingent, convinced him to commit the Greeks to its protection, in order to be able to come back from Scythia without any trouble.⁷ In reward for this wise advise, Coes was later granted the tyranny of Mytilena.⁸ Two months later, and if the king was not back, the Ionians were free to leave the place. After sixty days, Miltiades, tyrant of Chersonesos, pleaded for leaving Darius at his own fate with the Scythians but [Histiaios of Miletus](#) argued that without Darius none of the Greek leaders would ever rule their cities anymore. Histiaios convinced his colleagues and gave orders so that Darius could easily cross the bridge on his way back.⁹ Thanks to this, Histiaios was rewarded, according to Herodotus,¹⁰ with the Thracian region of Myrcinus in the land of the Hedonon, a district rich in timber and precious metals.

Land concession is a common way used by the Great King to thank those who were helpful or to insure someone's fidelity. This does not imply a renunciation of his sovereignty on an estate or a city, but the concession of the income produced by this land.¹¹ Of course, this method was not always successful. Having conquered the Lydian kingdom of [Croesus](#), [Cyrus the younger](#) entrusted the Persian Tabalos with the city of [Sardis](#) and ordered the Lydian Paktyes to transfer Croesus' treasures to Susa. Paktyes revolted against Tabalos with the help of some Ionian cities. The rebellion was severely subdued and several coastal Greek cities were besieged by the Persian army.¹²

Personal infidelity to the King could be one of the reasons of the [Revolt of Ionia](#) in 499 B.C. According to Herodotus,¹³ [Aristagoras](#) of Miletus, entrusted as tyrant of his city, would have conceived to launch a revolt against the Persians, because he feared to lose his lordship of [Miletus](#), due to his personal failure to conquer in the name of Darius the island of [Naxos](#) and the surrounding Cyclades.

3.2. Greek exiles

Another category of Greeks granted a special position in the Persian state was that of exiles from Greek cities, most of them from mainland Greece. Hippias, tyrant of Athens, fled his city in 511/0 B.C. and sought refuge in Sigeion (which his father, Peisistratos, had once conquered and gave it to his son [Hegesistratos](#)¹⁴ and then in [Lampsakos](#). He had formerly given his daughter Archedike in marriage to Aiantides, the son of [Hippoklos](#), tyrant of Lampsakos).¹⁵ Afterwards, he went to Darius' court where he became influential upon the king. Some twenty years later, in 490 B.C., Hippias took part in a punitive expedition against Eretria and Athens. If the Persians had won the battle of Marathon, Hippias would have been set again by the Persians at the head of the Athenian state, as a reward of his advice. But the expedition failed.¹⁶ Hippias' fate and death are still a mystery, but it appears that some unknown Peisistratides was still influential upon Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.).¹⁷

In 478, Pausanias, king of Sparta, entered in negotiations with Xerxes and offered him to subdue the whole Greece if Xerxes gave him his daughter in wedding. The Great King was pleased and encouraged his resolutions, even if he would not give him a wife.¹⁸

After the second Persian War, [Themistokles](#) was ostracized from Athens (471/0) and soon convicted to death in absentia (468/7). He went to many places around Greece, before requesting the hospitality of Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.). Themistokles learned the Persian language and customs and soon held a position of trustworthiness by Artaxerxes, a status that no Greek had ever reached. Having a very high opinion of the man, the King granted him the governorship of [Magnesia on the Maeander](#), which supplied a very good income, but also Lampsakos and [Myus](#).¹⁹



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3.3. Councillors to the Great King

There were surely many Greeks who lived at the King's court and enjoyed the honorific position of counsellor. For instance, Darius I (522-486 B.C.) called Histaios of Miletus to his court, fearing that he was becoming too powerful in his newly founded Thracian city.²⁰ Darius only let him go back to Ionia to calm down the uprising that had started in 499. It is clear that the Great King only honored those men because they could help him to regulate the relations between the Persians, local populations and political players. Greeks were certainly not alone at the Persian court but together with aristocrats from other countries — like the Egyptian Udjahorresnet, who stayed for some time at Darius' court. Even if the honors granted by the Persians were sometimes important, indigenous aristocrats never became equal to the Persian noblemen. There was no exception in this rule and when some Greeks reached a very high position in the King's court, Persian aristocrats felt threatened and reacted. According to Plutarchus,²¹ Themistokles was honored as much as the best of the Persians and Thucydides²² explains how Pausanias, the Spartan King praised by Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.), behaved like a Persian satrap.

For the Persian Kings, the granting of favours, honorific titles or political offices to Greeks as well as to other indigenous aristocrats everywhere in the Empire was part of a very clever political strategy to administer a huge territory with a multitude of subdued nations. For some Greeks, Persian rule was a way among others to get a dominant position, not in the Persian hierarchy (from which they were definitely excluded), but in their own communities, by emphasizing the honors granted by a mighty lord. For others, like Themistokles, banished from his city, it was a way to keep his aristocratic lifestyle. Interpersonal relationships were essential to the building of social status and, of course, these relations were not restricted to the city to which one belonged.

1. Hdt. 7. 82-97

2. Briant, P., *Histoire de l'Empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre* (Paris 1996)

3. Hofstetter, F., *Die Griechen in Persien. Prosopographie der Griechen im persischen Reich vor Alexander* (Berlin 1978)

4. Hdt. 3.139-149

5. Hdt. 8.85

6. Hdt. 4. 87-88

7. Hdt. 4.97-98

8. Hdt. 5.11

9. Hdt. 4.133-142

10. Hdt. 5.11

11. Briant, P., "Dons de terres et de villes: l'Asie Mineure dans le contexte achéménide", *REA* 87 (1985) 53 ff.

12. Hdt. 1.153-161



13. Hdt. 5.35






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- 14. cf. Hdt. 5.94-95
- 15. cf. Th. 6.59
- 16. Hdt. 6.102-117
- 17. Hdt. 7.6
- 18. Th. 1.128-129
- 19. Th. 1.128-129
- 20. Hdt. 5.23-24
- 21. Plu. *Them.* 31, 3
- 22. Th. 1.130



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	Briant P. , <i>Histoire de l' Empire Perse. De Cyrus à Alexandre</i> , Paris 1996
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	Darius the Great: the cloak of Syloson http://www.livius.org/da-dd/darius/darius_i_t04.html
	Darius the Great: the list of satrapies http://www.livius.org/da-dd/darius/darius_i_t08.html
	The madness of Cambyses http://www.livius.org/he-hg/herodotus/hist03.htm

Glossary :

	satrap, the The title designated a representative of the Persian king, and was widely used in the Persian language. In ancient writers the term usually designates an official of the Persian empire who assumes highest political and military power within the limits of his <i>satrapia</i> , the division under his command. Alexander the Great introduced the institution to the administrative organisation of his empire in the East. In the Roman empire, the office of the satrap was hereditary for Armenian nobles who administered an Armenian <i>klima</i> (=canton, a historic-geographical unit); in the case of the Armenian territories inside the Roman Empire, the satrap yielded limited power under the suzerainty of the Roman emperor.
	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.



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Sources

Herodotus, *Historiae*, books 3, 4, 5, 7.

Plutarch, *Vitae: Themistocles*.