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Histiaeus of Miletus

Summary :

Greek tyrant of Miletus (second half of the 5th century B.C.). He gained the favour of the Great King and was awarded with a Thracian region. His powerful position there arose the suspicions and was called back to the Persian court, where he was appointed counsellor. He instigated the Revolt of Ionia in order to go back to Miletus. After the failure of the revolt he was arrested and executed.

DATE AND PLACE OF DEATH

493 BC – Sardis

MAIN ROLE

Tyrant

1. Life and activity

Histiaios son of Lysagoras and tyrant of [Miletus](#). Albeit Herodotus' *Histories* are the only source for his biography (except a brief mention in Cornelius Nepos' *Vita Miltiadis*),¹ a dedication to Apollo by an Histiaios is reported from [Didyma](#).² Because of its dating (525-500?), it could be related to the well-known tyrant. Unfortunately, no precise offering could be associated to the reused, and now lost, inscribed base.

Histiaios was already ruling Miletus when [Darius I](#) (522-486 B.C.) started his expedition against Scythia ca. 513 B.C. and took with him a contingent of vassal tyrants from Hellespont, Eolia and Ionia. According to Herodotus,³ Darius ordered to the Ionian fleet to build a bridge on the Danube and, after the wise advise of Coes the Mytilenean, he committed to its protection the Greeks who had build it. If he was not back with his army within sixty days, the Great King allowed the Ionians to sail back home. As he was late to the appointment, nomad Scythians tried to convince the Ionians to leave Darius at his own fate, to break the bridge, and to return to their cities. They told them not to be afraid anymore of Darius whom they swear to defeat. Thereupon the Ionians held a council. Miltiades, tyrant of Chersonesos, pleaded for doing as the Scythians said and for freeing Ionia. Histiaios of Miletus held the contrary opinion, arguing that without Darius none of them would ever rule anymore their cities, for they would choose democracy rather than despotism. Histiaios convinced his colleagues and gave orders so that Darius could easily cross the bridge on his way back.⁴

Compared to Miltiades, Histiaios played the bad role from a democratic perspective, but we cannot ignore the deep Philaid bias of Herodotus' sources on this episode glorifying Miltiades. The story was remodelled in such a way that it would serve Miltiades' fame when he was charged with tyranny in a trial at his return in Athens in 493.⁵ Nevertheless, Histiaios was rewarded, according to Herodotus,⁶ with the Thracian region of Myrcinus in the Edonian land, a district rich in timber and precious metal, where he would build a city. With regard to the achievements of Darius' Scythian expedition, Pierre Briant⁷ points out the positive results: Thrace was now under Achaemenid control as north as the Danube. With all its resources Thrace was a strategic domain.

Histiaios knew it as much as Darius and he started to fortify Myrcinus by the river Strymon, the place he was rewarded with. As soon as [Megabazus](#) learned what Histiaios was about, he told the entire story to Darius, making him wonder if it was a good deal to give Histiaios this land. Megabazus convinced Darius to call back Histiaios to the Persian court and to never let him go back to Greece. Histiaios was ordered with much diplomacy to leave Miletus and his newly founded Thracian city: he was to be granted the honorary position of counsellor at Susa.⁸ Such was Histiaios' situation in 511-510. We do no more hear about him until 500-499.

2. Ionian revolt



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At that time, Milet was ruled by [Aristagoras](#) - Histiaios' nephew and son-in-law, who had just failed to conquer the island of [Naxos](#) and the surrounding Cyclades in the name of Dareius - and under the supervision of the Persian satrap of Sardis Artaphernes I. It was at this critical moment, according to Herodotus,⁹ that Aristagoras, in fear that his lordship of Miletus would be taken away from him, received a message of Histiaios. This message launched the [Revolt of Ionia](#). The following folk-tale is well known.¹⁰ Because Histiaios disliked his enforced sojourn at Susa, he was hoping that in case of a revolt he would be sent back to his home city. Wishing to signify to Aristagoras that he should revolt but fearing that his messenger could divulge the secret, he shaved the head of his trustiest slave and picked marks on him. 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.

After Sardis had been taken and burnt by the Athenians and Ionians, Dareius, who had heard that Aristagoras was the leader of this conspiracy, called before him Histiaios and required some explanations.¹¹ By way of answer, Histiaios told him that the Ionians had taken occasion of him being removed out of their sight to establish democracy and to revolt against Persian rule, and he argued that he been in Ionia, no city would have stirred. He made the following proposal: if ever Dareius let him go back to Miletus, he promised to bring the country back to peace, to deliver to Dareius Aristagoras the troublemaker up and, moreover, to conquer Sardinia.

When he arrived in Sardis, Histiaios faced the opposition of Artaphernes, who had guessed that Histiaios had fomented the whole rebellion from Susa. Frightened by the satrap, Histiaios fled and crossed over to Chios. He then tried to regain his fatherland. But the Milesians were glad enough to be rid of Aristagoras and had no wish for Histiaios to resume his tyranny over them, now that they had tasted freedom. When Histiaios tried to force his way into Miletus by night, he was wounded in the thigh by a Milesian. Disappointed, he went to the Mytilenians, and he persuaded them to give him ships. With eight triremes, he sailed to Byzantium and seized all the ships that were sailing out of the Euxine.¹²

Hearing of the defeat of the Ionian fleet at [Lade](#) and of the sack of Miletus by the Persian army, Histiaios sailed with Lesbians to Chios, and he subdued to his will the inhabitants.¹³ Remembering the wealth of his former Thracian possession in Myrcinus, Histiaios brought a great force of Ionians and Aeolians against Thasos, which had a perea in Thracia. But, when he heard that the Phoenicians in Miletus were preparing to attack the rest of Ionian cities, he left Thasos and hastened with all his army to Lesbos. Thence, crossing to Aeolia to collect from Atarneus corn to feed his troops, he was captured by the Persian general [Harpagus](#) and brought to Sardis, where Artaphernes' hatred was fatal to him. His body was impaled and his embalmed head sent to Susa to Dareius. The King actually deplored that such a thing had been done to a man who was, years ago, so helpful to himself and to Persia.¹⁴ In the spring of 493, the Phoenician fleet sailed on and subdued the last recalcitrant cities.

Much debate has been conducted on Aristagoras' and Histiaios' reasons for the Ionian Revolt,¹⁵ for one cannot but agree that Herodotus' relation is full of romantic stories. Actually, there are still unresolved problems even on the exact chronology of the events, and Herodotus' silence on the economic, social and effective political situation of Ionian poleis under Persian rules does not help historians to explain the uprising of all the West coast of Asia Minor.

The personal motives of Aristagoras and Histiaios alleged by Herodotus —whose anti-Ionian feelings are well known— do not convince at all. For instance, Histiaios' obsession for Thrace or his practice of piracy in the Hellespont, two acts unexplained by Herodotus, were certainly attempts to regain money in hope to proceed with the struggle. Moreover, our Greece centered sources (in fact Herodotus alone) put a deep bias. Considered from the East, at the scale of the Achaemenid Empire which expanded from Macedonia to the Indus River, the Ionian Revolt was probably not a very important event, as Pierre Briant has clearly shown.¹⁶

1. Nepos, *Milt.* 3,5






2. *SEG* XXX, 1283



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3. Hdt. 4. 89, 97-98
4. Hdt. 4.133-142
5. Viviers, D., Historiographie et propagande politique au Ve s. anè : les Philaïdes et la Chersonèse de Thrace, *RFIC* 115 (1987) p. 288 ff.
6. Hdt. 5.11
7. Briant, P., *Histoire de l'Empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre* (Paris 1996) p. 154 ff.
8. Hdt. 5.23-24
9. Hdt. 5.35
10. Aen. *Tact.* 31.28-29. Polyæn. 1.24. Gell. 17. 9, 19-27
11. Hdt. 5.105-107
12. Hdt. 6.1-5
13. Hdt. 6.26-27
14. Hdt. 6.28-30
15. See the selected, albeit impressive, bibliography in Briant, P., *Histoire de l'Empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre* (Paris 1996) p. 932 ff.
16. Briant, P., *Histoire de l'Empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre* (Paris 1996) p. 158 ff.

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