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A Local Revolt in Babylonia during the Reign of Darius III

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Yazdan Safaee. A Local Revolt in Babylonia during the Reign of Darius III. DABIR, 2017, 1 (4), pp.51-56. halshs-03213878

HAL Id: halshs-03213878

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03213878>

Submitted on 30 Apr 2021

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Digital Archive of Brief notes & Iran Review

Vol.01

№.04.2017



JORDAN CENTER
FOR PERSIAN STUDIES

www.dabirjournal.org

ISSN: 2470-4040





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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

The Digital Archive of Brief Notes & Iran Review (DABIR)

ISSN: 2470-4040

www.dabirjournal.org

Samuel Jordan Center for Persian Studies and Culture
University of California, Irvine
1st Floor Humanities Gateway
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Digital Archive of Brief notes & Iran Review

Vol.01

No.04.2017

ISSN: 2470 - 4040

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University of California, Irvine

A Local Revolt in Babylonia During the Reign of Darius III

Yazdan Safaee

Before Darius III, Arses and, before him, Artaxerxes III were the kings of Persia. Artaxerxes III killed many nobles to come to throne (Plutarch's lives, *Artaxerxes*, 23-25) and ruled for 23 years. He was succeeded by his son Arses who was killed in a conspiracy and Darius III became king (Lecoq, 1986: 548). Although Darius III was a member of the collateral branch, *i.e.* he was not a direct descendant of the royals, his accession guaranteed the continuation of the Achaemenid dynasty as a hereditary monarchy (Briant, 1996: 797-799). It seems that, due to the Persian nobles' support (Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander*, III, 3.14, 21; Diodorus Siculus, *The Historical Library*, XVII, 20. 2; cf. Stronk, 2017: 284, fn 44), Darius had no problem in the Empire's heartland. This, however, was not the case in Egypt (Dandamaev, 1989: 314) and Babylonia.

As Pierre Briant discusses, the reign of Darius III has always been in the shadow of Alexander the Great and all of the attention has been drawn to the Macedonian's expedition (Briant 2003). Most sources focus only on the history of Alexander's victories and, probably as a result, Darius III is portrayed as a coward king (Badian, 2000: 241-242; Nylander 1993). However, classical sources are not considered the sole evidence for the history of the last years of the Achaemenid dynasty. Akkadian texts are also available as sources for a comparative study of the period (van der Spek 2003).

The accession of Darius III was the guarantor of rule of the hereditary Achaemenid dynasty. When there was no legitimate prince in the family, illegitimate princes fought to ascend to the throne. Marrying with princesses was also useful to gain legitimacy. Another possibility was that a member of the

collateral branch comes to power. It was in such circumstances that the Empire was facing local uprisings (Briant, 1996: 797-799).

In the present study, through the analysis of an Akkadian text, I will discuss a dubious revolt in Babylonia during the reign of Darius III before Alexander's expedition. It has been labeled by Amélie Kuhrt as an "unrest in Babylonia" (Kuhrt, 2007: 425-426). Information on this revolt comes from the reverse of a king list, IM 65066 (Grayson, 1980-1983: 97; cf. van Dijk, 1962: 58). Kuhrt has translated the list as follows (Kuhrt, 2007: 425-426):

(Break)
 [...whose] other name is Nidin-B[el?]
 Years 5 Dariu[s]
 Years 7 (?) Alexander
 Years 6 Philip
 Years 6 Antigonos
 Years 31 Seleucus
 Years 22 Antiochus
 Years 15 Antiochus
 Years 20 Seleucus
 (Break)

This list is found at Uruk and covers in its preserved portion the period from Kandalānu (647-627 B.C.) to Darius I (521-486 B.C.) on its obverse, and from Darius III (335-331 B.C.) to Seleucus II (246-226 B.C.) on its reverse. The script is late Babylonian and the tablet was inscribed sometime after the reign of Seleucus II (Grayson, 1980-1983: 97; See also van Dijk, 1962: 53-61).

Van Dijk brought forth a possibility in which Nidin-Bel could be a second name for Arses (van Dijk, 1962: 58). Yet, the hypothesis cannot be accepted due to the absence of using the name "Nidin-Bel" for calling Arses in Akkadian sources. It is not clear how long Nidin-Bel ruled in Babylonia or what his origin was exactly. Plus, Nidin-Bel was also the name of the first Babylonian rebel during the reign of Darius I.¹ In his paper, Matthew Stolper stated that the rebel's identity is unclear (Stolper, 1994: 240):

His identity is unexplained: he is unlikely to be Arses; he may be one of the rebels from the reign of Darius I, misplaced by manuscript corruption; but he may also be an otherwise unrecorded local usurper who claimed power in Babylon during the unstable period of the assassinations that brought Darius III to the throne.

Amélie Kuhrt refers to Stolper and concludes that there is no evidence to support that this rebel existed during the reign of Darius III and a mistake is perhaps a better explanation (Kuhrt, 2007: 426, fn. 8). In an earlier paper, she argues as follows (Kuhrt, 1987: 149):

The obverse, which breaks off after Darius I, has received close attention in connection with the problems of the chronology of the end of the Neo-Assyrian empire and the rise of the Chaldaean dynasty in Babylonia. The reverse (because of the manner in which cuneiform tablets are turned) has lost its upper section:

¹- His name in line 17 of Babylonian version of Behistun is ^m[ni-din]-tú-^dEN (von Viogtlander, 1978:21). It appears in line 16 of Old Persian version as Nadintabaira (Schmidt, 2009: 47).

it ends with Seleucus II and the present first line lists, preceding Darius III, “x whose other name is Nidin-B[ēl]”. This is tantalising and frustrating. It cannot really represent an Achaemenid ruler (the throne and personal names of these are attested) but it is very reminiscent of the name of the first Babylonian rebel leader in 522 at Darius I’s accession. Does the list then provide the name of another as yet unknown Babylonian rebel - possibly following the murder of Arses by Bagoas in 336? In this case one would have evidence here of another Babylonian revolt at this late point though the chronology would be difficult. On the other hand the names of the rebels, Nidintu-Bēl and Arāka, are not preserved in the line preceding Darius I and I suggest that perhaps the name of the rebel leader in 522 was attached to the wrong Darius in the Seleucid period. However one interprets this text, clearly there was access to the type of material from which such a list could be constructed.

The idea that Nidin-Bel did not exist, just because there is no evidence of his existence but in one broken tablet, is not acceptable. If he is not mentioned in other sources, it could be interpreted as a result of the instability and short duration of the revolt. In fact, it seems that the lack of other types of evidence for the revolt is related to the unstable situation of that time. It is possible that, after consolidating his power, Darius III suppressed the revolt so quickly that no trace of Nidin-Bel was left in other sources.

Van Dijk has pointed out that it was a possible revolt. The local usurper, during the reign of Darius III, claimed power in Babylon and chose the name “Nidin-Bel” as his predecessor did during the reign of Darius I (van Dijk, 1962: 58). Obviously, during the reign of Darius I, the so-called insurgent chose the name of Nabuna’id’s son: “adam Nabukudracara ami, haya Nabunaḫrahya puça” (DB, S16; Schmitt 2009: 47-48; for Babylonian version, see von Viogtlander, 1978:56). Therefore, this hypothesis can be brought up: Nidin-Bel in the reign of Darius III did the same thing that Nidin-Bel in the reign of Darius I did; they both rebelled and chose names with a historical background. There are also many examples in the Achaemenid history in which insurgents took their predecessor’s names to obtain legitimization. We can compare unstable political situations during the reign of Darius the Great and to Darius III, because they were both members of the collateral branch and came to throne through political issues. Darius I was faced with revolts which some of their aspect are comparable to the rebel’s behavior in Darius III’s period:

1- The so-called Gaumāta called himself Bardia, son of Cyrus, and took the throne (DB, S 11-13, Schmitt, 2009: 42-45). 2- Nadintabaira son of Ainaira, a Babylonian man, called himself Nabukudracara son of Nabunaita (DB, S 16, Schmitt, 2009: 47-48). 3- Martiya, a Persian man, called himself Imani and rebelled in Elam (DB, S 22, Schmitt, 2009: 51-52). 4- Fravartiš, a Median man, called himself Xšaθrita from ancestry of Uvaxštrah (DB, S 24, Schmitt, 2009: 52). 5- Being descended from Uvaxštrah was a claim that was repeated later by another rebel (DB, S 33, Schmitt, 2009: 61). 6- Vahyazdāta is the next interesting case who rebelled calling himself Bardia (DB, S 40, Schmitt, 2009: 66). 7- Nabunaita at Babylonia had the same condition of Uvaxštrah. This time, an Armenian man, Araxa (like Nadintabaira) called himself Nabukudracara son of Nabunaita and rebelled at Babylon (DB, S 49, Schmitt, 2009: 72-73). One can see 7 out of 9 rebels in period of Darius I claimed that they are someone else or presented themselves as survivors of the ancient local kings; although the case of Gaumāta is much doubtful but these examples indicate that Darius was faced nine insurgents that 7 out of them have sought legitimacy in the fake ancestors.

Darius III was in the same unstable political situation. Therefore one can argue that it is truly likely that the rebel in the reign of Darius III called himself Nidin-Bel according to this pattern. The first rebel

was looking for legitimacy and the second one chose his name to show that he wanted to finish the work of his predecessor. Van Dijk did not consider this comparison while he was analysing this text. Kuhrt neglected it while she was focusing on the possibility of scribe's fault and Stolper had no decisive comment about it. Therefore, Nidin-Bel chose his new name. Such an argument increases the possibility of occurrence of a local revolt in Babylonia.

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