

To What Extent Did the Rule of Cambyses II and Darius I Influence Egyptian Society?

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Abstract: From 525-332 BC, Egypt was conquered and ruled by the Persian empire. Throughout this period, the first two emperors: Cambyses II and Darius I both played an important role in establishing Persian rule over Egypt. As a traditional society, the collision between the Egyptian ideology and the presence of the Persian empire influenced the administrative, cultural-political, and social structure of Egypt. This paper aims to discuss the influence of Cambyses II and Darius I on Egyptian society. As a result, these two Persian rulers mostly influenced the upper group of Egyptian society in order to integrate Egypt into Persia while exerting very few changes to the basic social order of Egypt. The disruption of Egyptian tradition includes establishing the province administration, cultural-political influence through introducing Persian-Egyptian imagery and corporation with the local elites. Although the presence of Persians caused changes in the legal and infrastructural system as well as some secondary effects on the Egyptian ethnicity belief, the Egyptian society mostly remained untouched and able to assimilate just some of the influences.

Keywords: Persian empire, Egypt, social history

1. Introduction

Before the Persian invasion, Egypt developed its social status as an old and traditional area. The rule of Cambyses II and Darius I influenced Egyptian society after each conquest. Although the ruling was disrupted by the rebellion in 524 BC, the policies between these two emperors had lots of similarities and continuity. Therefore, by using Herodotus' Histories as the primary source, this paper seeks to assess the overall influence of these two Persian rulers through three different perspectives, including the administration, cultural-political situation, and social structure.

2. Assessment of the Histories by Herodotus

First, it is important to assess the politics and culture relative to the information provided by the Histories by Herodotus as it is the main source of this paper. As a Greek elite and a member of the Persian empire, it is convincing to say that Herodotus' understanding of the administration of the Persian empire is fairly reliable. Moreover, although the exact year when the Histories was written is unclear, Herodotus' life around 484-425 BC is very close to the age of Darius: 521-485 BC.

Therefore, his records of the policies of Darius and the events of the Persian empire such as its expansion and reform are relatively valid and match the description of the Behistun Inscription [1].

Although there are many phrases in the Histories like “said they” which implies his source of information could be often subjective and politically biased, this communication with elites and priests suggests a great quality of the recording [2]. As the elites were more engaged with Persian politics, their understanding of the administration of Persia was certainly more accurate than ordinary people. Hence, even though some of the political factual details provided by the Histories contained some level of bias, it is still a great source to study the administration of Cambyses or Darius’ Persian empire.

On the other hand, as the audience of the book was Greeks, the purpose of the book was to “in order that so the memory of the past may not be blotted out from among men by time, and that great and marvellous deeds done by Greeks and foreigners.”, it is convincing to suggest that the descriptions of cultures in other areas have biases and subjective comments as Herodotus presented them from a Greek perspective [2]. Nevertheless, the fact that he travelled to Egypt to collect sources allowed him to make rich and detailed records of Egyptian culture and behaviour. As this paper only discusses Persian Egypt which avoids the controversial topics of the Greco-Persian War in the Histories, the quality of the Histories of Egypt is arguably good. Therefore, this paper would avoid using too detailed political information and comments on Egyptian culture and focus on the policies of Cambyses and Darius and descriptions of Egyptian culture to make sure their reliability of them.

3. Administrative Influence

Although the administration established by Cambyses II before Darius in Egypt was rather unsuccessful and had a very limited effect due to the strong resistance from Egyptians, the successful cooperation with Egyptian elites allowed Darius to efficiently govern Egypt while disrupting the old Egyptian administration. It is fair to argue that the satrap system established and reformed by Darius represents a strong influence of Persian political ideology on Egyptian politics.

According to the Histories: “so done in Persia, he divided his dominions into twenty governments, called by the Persians satrapies; and doing so and appointing governors” and “The sixth province was Egypt [...]”, Egypt was classified as one of the twenty provinces in the Persian empire which is governed by a satrap [2]. This form of the military administrative complex where the satrap was able to control the military power and taxation in his respective provinces was clearly a Persian ideology inserted into the original Egyptian system. By connecting the statement from Oeconomicus: “every governor has orders from the king what number of cavalry, archers, slingers and targeteers it is his business to support [...] The actual support of these devolves upon the governor, to whom the duty is assigned.” and the Histories’ statement: “An hundred and forty of these were expended on the horsemen who were the guard of Cilicia”, it is very convincing to suggest that the economic support duty of the satrap refers to their tax collecting job [2,3].

Therefore, the satrap system is a way of connecting Egypt with the Persian empire economically and politically established by Darius. In order to reinforce and highlight the Persian ideology in this role, Darius changed the previous attitude of local governing from the local dominated form as suggested by the Histories’ phrase: “for the Persians are wont to honour king’s sons [...] yet they give back to their sons the sovereign power.” into Persian dominant satrap administration [2]. Hence, as far as the upper functions of the governing system, Egypt was heavily influenced by Darius’ Persian political approach and well connected with the wide idea of the Persian empire.

However, integrating Egypt into the Persian empire still relied on the local elites’ cooperation a lot which suggests the limitation of Persian ideology in Egyptian politics. Egyptian elites such as priests were treated with benefits and often allowed to engage in politics such as judges [4]. The

fact that many Egyptian elites participated in the job of “royal scribes” or translating Aramaic and common Egyptian language suggests the Persian province still relied on Egyptians to function [4]. Moreover, the nomarch system of Egypt was kept with little modification further supports this point. Hence, although Darius inserted a Persian political ideology of the satrap system to establish Persian rule in Egypt, the use of local elites in the province administration and the constant Nome system shows that the Persian political ideology did not influence the local political system in Egypt [5]. It is more convincing to argue that Darius established limited Persian politics to cooperate with the Egyptian elites in order to integrate it into the Persian empire.

Therefore, it is clear that although Darius introduced a new Persian administration which significantly changed the traditional system of the Egyptian ruling class, this system did not influence the more basic and local administration of Egypt. All the Persian influence in the administration was only exerted on the existing Egyptian system rather than making a reform.

4. Cultural-Political Influence

The influence of Cambyses II on the Egyptian cultural-political perspective is not as clear and consistent as Darius'. This is partly caused by the bias of the Histories when commenting on the detailed policies and actions of Cambyses, who is presented as a tyrant in the book. The policies from Cambyses can be broadly summarised into two aspects, the destruction of the old Pharaoh and presenting himself as a new Persian Pharaoh. The policies target the upper ruling system of Egypt and have influenced the traditional Egyptian culture and politics.

According to the Histories: “Cambyses took Psammenitus king of Egypt, [...], to do him despite”, the humiliation towards the previous ruler of Egypt clearly demonstrated the Persian victory against Egypt as well as destroying the holy and great image of the king in Egyptian political culture [2]. Through this action, Cambyses sent a message to the Egyptian elites that their traditional king was no longer the highest ruler but a subject to the Persian emperor.

Nevertheless, it would be unfair to conclude that Cambyses was a tyrant who purposely destructed the Egyptian political culture because he still seeks some level of cooperation with the Egyptian elites. The fact that Cambyses kept Psammenitus alive and allowed him to rule Egypt: “Cambyses himself felt somewhat of pity [...] and that Psammenitus himself be taken from the outer part of the city and brought before him.” and “had he but been wise enough to mind his own business, he would have so far won back Egypt as to be governor of it” all show that he wanted to use this generosity to make the Egyptian elites feel less resistant to being ruled by him as well as using the legitimacy of the king to govern Egypt [2,6].

However, his policies and attitudes toward the Egyptian priests and religion were very controversial when comparing different sources. Nevertheless, it can be argued that this inconsistency of policy reflected Cambyses II's process of forming cooperation with the local elites. Such process can be summarised as from being against and disrespecting the Egyptian religious figures to the stage where with the negotiation and help from Egyptian elites, Cambyses was able to form cooperation with them which suggests his overall limited influence over the Egyptian cultural-political structure [6].

Cambyses was primarily against Egyptian culture. Although the reliability of the story of Cambyses killing the sacred Apis ox is very doubtful as the archaeological discovery in 1853 disproved it, it is convincing that according to the statue of Udjahorresne, Cambyses destructed the Saite state and Egyptian temples during the invasion which clearly demonstrates that he was primarily against the Egyptian culture [7]. Therefore, formed an opposing relationship between the Egyptian elites and Persian rule which caused great destruction over the Egyptian religious pride which the priests believed in according to the Histories: “Further, the Egyptians (said they) first used the appellations of twelve gods” [2]. Moreover, his policies on limiting the power of priests

and Egyptian temples by reducing their tax collection abilities further changes the cultural-political situation for the traditional dominating Egyptian elites [4].

On the other hand, from the statue of Udjahorresne, Cambyses rebuilt the temples of Neith destroyed at Sais. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the support from some Egyptian elites helped him gain legitimacy to rule Egypt. Again, in the statue of Udjahorresne, after Cambyses was convinced to rebuild the temples, Udjahorresne presented and praised Cambyses as a legitimate Egyptian Pharaoh using the traditional Egyptian political language “King of Upper and Lower Egypt”. [7,8].

Hence, as the priests got their respect back, the influence of Cambyses on Egyptian cultural politics was limited. This can be further proven by the phrase from the statue: “the Great Chief of all foreign lands, Cambyses” as Persia was still seen as a separate image from Egypt [7]. Therefore, even though he caused a significant impact on Egyptian cultural politics, the close cooperation with the elites helped keep the Egyptian culture and perhaps left a potential long-term influence which Darius I carried on and took further under the short period of Cambyses’ rule, failed to do so.

To some extent, Darius inserted a strong Persian cultural ideology on Egypt by mixing the image of the Persian monarch with the Egyptian Pharaoh which is coherent with Cambyses’ policy. Darius the Great’s Suez Inscriptions and the Egyptian statue of Darius I are great evidence suggesting that Darius used elements of Egyptian culture to present him as a Pharaoh [5]. The use of Egyptian and Persian languages on the inscriptions indicates that their targeting audiences were Egyptians as well. The mixed Egyptian and Persian style of the Sun, the image of Egyptian Gods and the texts all send a message that Darius has the Egyptian God-given right to rule Egypt. On the Egyptian statue of Darius I, the language used to describe Darius: “To you is given Upper and Lower Egypt, who offer their adoration to your beautiful face, like unto the god Ra, in eternity.” further supports the use of Egyptian God to legitimise his rule [8].

Moreover, the following Persian-style expressions on the statue: “A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, and who made Darius king.” clearly suggests that Darius wanted to present himself as a Persian emperor with the title of Pharaoh instead of simply a replacement [5]. The result of this kind of Persian cultural influence is reflected in the attitude of Egyptian elites toward Persia.

Comparing the pre-Persian rule state of Egypt when the Egyptian elites held high pride in their culture, the establishment of Darius’ rule significantly destructed this pride. According to the Histories: “so well is each persuaded that its own is by far the best” and “the Egyptians deemed themselves to be the oldest nation on earth” [2]. On the statue of Udjahorresne, he was dressed in Persian clothes and the text suggests he was honoured and proud to serve Darius [7]. Hence, under Darius’ cultural influence, the authority of the Persian emperor was integrated into Egyptian culture among the local elites. The message that Egypt is no longer the best civilisation but part of the twenty provinces of Persia and Pharaoh is not the holiest title but one of the titles owned by Darius influenced the belief of Egyptian elites a lot. Furthermore, Darius was active in fixing and building Egyptian temples just like Cambyses. Combining the fact that he used Egyptian religion to present his image as a Pharaoh, it is fair to say that Cambyses and Darius only inserted the idea of a Persian emperor in Egypt to legitimise his rule. Although it damaged the pride of Egyptian elites, the local religion and social order were not disrupted by Darius.

Overall, Cambyses and Darius only exerted limited influence on the existing Egyptian cultural-political structure. While admitting the success and significance of Persian cultural influence on the Egyptian political tradition including the position of the Egyptian religious figures and the mixture of Persian-Egyptian imagery of the emperor, it is important to understand that most of these changes were limited to the elite group in Egypt.

5. Social Influence

Regarding social structure and system, Cambyses II and Darius I formed a continuous chain of influence on the Egyptian population. Therefore, the following section would explain based on factors of change rather than a monarchy. As mentioned before, the Persian cultural and political influences inserted by Cambyses and Darius to integrate Egypt did not extend to the ordinary. The petition from Petiese demonstrates that the social order of local areas was not changed by the Persian conquest or Darius' reform, as they kept their local political struggle throughout the ruling of Cambyses and Darius. Even though their ruling made some secondary or minor changes, the general Egyptian society remained undisrupted for governing [8].

The presence of the Persian empire led to a fair level of interaction between the other ethnic groups and Egyptians. First, it is essential to understand how the Egyptian view ethnicity during that period. There are two significant factors when Egyptians classify ethnicity: their living environments, daily behaviour, languages, and religion, as well as a detailed observation of their skin colour, hair, and clothing. From the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the meaning of people living in mountains and deserts could be found in the word "xAstyw", the foreigner [9]. In comparison with the rice fields and agricultural nature of Egypt, it is clear that there is an excellent distinction from the Egyptian view between themselves and the foreigners.

However, even though there were different ethnicities living in Egypt, the rule of Persia, especially during Darius' period, resulted in more foreigners being mixed into the Egyptian society and being Egyptianized which undermined such division between Egyptians and foreigners in the Egyptian society [10]. Both the appointed Persian officials and the establishment of the province system were responsible for foreigners like Persians and Libyans increasingly living in the traditional Egyptian region as supported by the Histories: "The sixth province was Egypt and the neighboring parts of Libya, and Cyrene and Barca, all which were included in the province of Egypt" [2]. This process of Egyptianizing can be seen in cases like stelae left by foreigners. One of the stelae found in the Memphite area contained Egyptian hieroglyphics but carved on behalf of the Carian king. At the same time, many typical Egyptian mourning scenes were found on Aramaic inscriptions. In contrast, the Egyptian style of Sun could be found on many Persian inscriptions, including Darius the Great's Suez Inscriptions, indicating the Egyptianizing process of foreigners [5].

Apart from the mixing of art and literature, the attitude of Persian officials was also Egyptianized which again demonstrates some degree of mixed ethnicity in Egyptian society. According to Stela Aswan, the temples in that region were built by Persian officials dedicated to an Egyptian deity [7]. The Stela of Saqqara presented a funerary scene of a Persian-Egyptian man with both Persian and Egyptian ceremonial elements, including an Egyptian mummified and Persian recipient. At the same time, some of the Egyptian elites were also influenced by Persian culture. Based on the Stela of Somtutefnakht, the personal loyalty to the Persian empire was demonstrated: You put love of me in the heart of Asian ruler. These cases of the mixture of Persian and Egyptian culture demonstrated the change in Egyptian society under Persian rule. They suggested the respect from the Persian administration that allowed this phenomenon to happen [10].

As suggested in the Behistun inscription: "my law was upheld throughout these nations; whatever I commanded, that they accomplished." Darius enforced a new legal system with written code in Egypt. Although there is not much evidence to suggest the effectiveness of this law, the harsh language used in the inscription indicates a strong sense of authority and its broad application.

At the same time, Darius I exerted some profound infrastructural changes in Egyptian society. The canal built by Darius that connected the Nile and Suez allowed foreign trades to be more active in Egyptian societies. While knowing the lack of statistical evidence that supports such an argument,

the increasing frequency of non-Egyptian merchants' names found in written records around Saqqara could at least imply the rising activities of foreign trades [10,11].

Hence, the rule of Cambyses and Darius encouraged the social mix between Egypt and other ethnicities. It is convincing to say that Egyptian society absorbed more foreigners and adopted some of their cultures during that period while preserving the overall structure of its society.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, although the policy Cambyses and Darius disagreed with, the Persian administration and cultural-political structure exercised by Cambyses and Darius mainly influenced the very top of Egyptian society. Even though Cambyses lacked actions on administrative affairs and had a complex interaction with the Egyptian religious figures of power, his effort to form cooperation with the Egyptian elites by using the Pharaoh presentation or revisiting the position of some of the elites resulted in effective changes in the ruling-class of Egypt. This policy of integrating Egypt into Persia was continued and enlarged by Darius. He established effective satrap administration and successfully cooperated with local elites by forming Persian-Egyptian imagery of ruler. However, while admitting their influence over the ruling class of Egypt, the ordinary Egyptian society was not influenced to the same extent, since most of the direct or secondary effects caused by the coherent social influence from Persian rulers were adapted and absorbed into the traditional Egyptian society.

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