



Summary :

In c. 513 BC, the Persian king Darius I campaigned in Thrace and Scythia. The tributary Greek cities of Asia Minor and the eastern Aegean islands participated in the campaign providing most of the ships for the Persian fleet, with their local tyrants as commanders. In order to transport the troops into Europe a pontoon, a bridge made up of ships, was constructed over the Bosphorus. Darius' army then marched up to Ister (modern Danube). Darius invaded Scythia. Soon he found himself in a difficult position and was forced to retreat.

Date

513 BC

Geographical Location

Thrace, western shores of the Black Sea, Scythia

1. Sources

Given that modern scholars have expressed serious reservations about the accuracy of Herodotus' account, our sole source on the campaign, in several cases it is impossible to even provide a general outline of its main events. In many places this account is justifiably considered vague, contradictory and inaccurate, or even downright fictional. Adducing historical, archaeological, geographical and historiographical evidence, scholars have put forth various views on the chronology, the causes and the events of Darius' Scythian Campaign. The campaign is dated to c. 513 BC.¹

2. Causes

According to [Herodotus](#), Darius wished to exact revenge on the [Scythians](#) for an invasion they had launched into Media a century earlier.² In this, he is also indirectly shown to follow the advice of queen Atossa; she urged Darius to embark upon a large-scale campaign and assert himself as a brave ruler in the eyes of the Persians. Thus, the other Persian nobles would be occupied with the war, and have no time to conspire against him.³

Many historians have pondered on other possible causes beyond this casual and rather simplistic explanation. We should note that the underlining motivation should obviously be deduced by the direction and scale of the Persian operations, quantities anything but known. The campaign is seen by some as an instance of unadulterated expansionism, lacking a specific aim. Darius simply wanted to expand his rule as far as possible and bring all the areas around the Black Sea under Persian control. According to another theory, the campaign was mainly exploratory.

For others, the campaign was so ambitious that it could only aim at the conquest, in one broad E-W sweep, of all the areas nowadays comprising southern Ukraine, Russia, the Caucasus, even parts of Central Asia, in order to shield the entire northern Asiatic borders of the Persian Empire against future invasions. On the other end of the spectrum, some believe Darius' objectives were much more modest, i.e. the subjection of Thrace and making Ister (modern Danube) his northern natural frontier in Europe; the advance beyond this point was a colossal display of force intended for the Scythians, discouraging any thoughts of intervening in Thrace or flanking the Persian army during its planned invasion into mainland Greece.

Naturally, the motives could also have been purely financial, as the annexation of new provinces into the Empire would create new sources of revenue through taxation. According to another related theory, the whole campaign was an attempt to open up new trade routes and gain access to new resources. This would have been extremely beneficial for the Ionian subjects of Darius, and it was perhaps ultimately for their sake that he launched this campaign.⁴

Recent archaeological evidence and studies, however, offer support to an earlier theory, according to which after crossing the Danube the Persians in fact headed northwest, and that Darius' main, if not sole goal, was to capture the goldmines in the land of the



Agathyrsoi, in modern Transylvania. Thus, the campaign aimed at conquering and securing the Empire's communications with an area rich in gold deposits; to do this, of course, it was essential to control and protect Thrace from the raids of the steppe nomads.⁵

3. The campaign

Whatever the main cause or combination of causes that led to the campaign, Darius marshalled his army and departed from Susa personally leading his army.⁶ It is likely that the **satrap** Ariaramnes had earlier launched reconnaissance raid along the Scythian shores of the Black Sea with a force of 30 penteconters.⁷ Herodotus reports that Darius gathered a host of 700,000 men, infantry and cavalry, drawn from all over the Empire, while the fleet comprised 600 ships.⁸ These figures are considered exaggerated. The largest part of the fleet came from the tributary Greek cities of Asia Minor, the European coasts of the Hellespont and the Aegean islands, under the command of the **tyrants** that ruled these cities. Participants in this campaign were Miltiades from Chersonesus, Daphnes from [Abydus](#), [Hippoclus](#) from [Lampsacus](#), Herophantus from [Parium](#), Metrodorus from [Proconnesus](#), Aristagoras from [Cyzicus](#), Ariston from [Byzantium](#), [Aristagoras](#) from [Cyme](#), Laodamas from [Phocaea](#), [Histiaeus](#) from [Miletus](#), Strattes from [Chios](#), Aeaces from [Samos](#)⁹ and the general of the people of [Mytilene](#), Coes.¹⁰

The army reached [Chalcedon](#) (modern Kadiköy) and crossed the Bosphorus using a pontoon bridge constructed by the Samian engineer Mandrocles. After the troops have crossed over, Darius ordered the Greek naval commanders to sail into the Black Sea up to the mouth of the Danube, to create another pontoon bridge and wait the army there. A part of the fleet remained behind to provide support for the operations in Thrace, in accordance with standard Persian practice.¹¹ The rest of the fleet within two days sailed upstream from the mouth of the Danube and constructed a pontoon bridge at the beginning of the river's delta.¹² In the meantime, the Persian army had begun its advance into eastern Thrace. With the exception of the Getae, the [Thracian tribes](#) submitted without offering resistance; these were eventually defeated and forced to follow the Persians in their campaign.¹³

Darius marched on northwards and reached the bridge at the Danube. When he crossed over to the other side with his army, he ordered the Ionians to disassemble the pontoon bridge and all the sailors follow him into Scythia. Coes, however, convinced him that, just in case, the army should have the option of returning via the same route. Darius then commanded the Ionian tyrants to remain at the spot and defend the bridge for sixty days. If he did not return within that period, they would be free to return to their homes.¹⁴ In general, this event is considered fictitious.¹⁵ At any rate, the Ionian fleet was left behind and the Persians invaded Scythia.

What happened there is impossible to ascertain. Perhaps Darius attempted to advance in a northwest direction up to Transylvania; if he followed a northeast direction, it is believed he only got as far as the river Tyras (modern Dniester). In any case, nothing substantial was achieved. The Scythians implemented a scorched-earth strategy, avoiding pitched battles and constantly launched surprise raids against the intruders with their cavalry. After suffering considerable losses, the Persian army was finally forced to retreat and headed for the bridge at the Danube.¹⁶

In the meantime, before Darius' sixty days period was over, the Scythians sent a contingent at the bridge and advised the Ionians to leave as soon as the two months had passed. The Ionians are said to have agreed and the Scythians departed.¹⁷ When more than sixty days had passed and the Persians were retreating and being pursued, the Ionians remained at their post. The Scythians appeared again and advised them to immediately disassemble the bridge and leave: this would allow them to trap and annihilate the enemy army inside Scythia, while the Ionians would be rid of the Persians' yoke. The tyrants convened a meeting, where Miltiades supported the Scythian suggestion, claiming it would bring freedom to Ionia. Histiaeus retorted that all of them owed their power to Darius and that the disintegration of Persian rule would mean the end of their authority as well, for all the cities would prefer a democratic regime. The rest finally sided with Histiaeus, yet decided to mislead the Scythians pretending again to agree to their proposal, and proceeded to disassemble a part of the bridge at its northern side. Thus the Scythians left relieved; when Darius arrived, the bridge was re-assembled and the Persians crossed the Danube. After this, the Scythians denounced the Ionians claiming that when free they are the world's meanest and most cowardly people, while as slaves there are most servile and docile.¹⁸



Although the historicity of Miltiades' display of patriotism has been rightly doubted,¹⁹ apparently there is a core of truth in the 'Danube episode'. It is likely that Darius' communications with the Danube were indeed disrupted by the Scythians, giving the Ionians a chance to abandon or turn against him, which is said to be the reason for the later punishment of [Antandrus](#) and Lamponium. Furthermore, while the Persian king was absent, and probably emboldened by rumours of his failure in Scythia, more Greek cities revolted, like Byzantium, Chalcedon and Perinthus.²⁰ This is why Darius was forced to return from Thrace via the Hellespont peninsula; from Sestos he crossed into Asia Minor. He left behind 80,000 men under [Megabazus](#) in Europe to put down the revolt and complete the conquest of Thrace.²¹ As for the Scythians, in the same or the following year, they launched a retaliatory raid against the Persians in Thrace, penetrating as far as the Hellespont.²²

1. For details on the issue of the campaign's date see Macan, R.W., *Herodotus II* (London-New York 1895), pp. 33-39. Cf. also Wade-Gery, H.T., "Miltiades", *JHS* 71 (1951), pp. 215-16 and n. 14; Georges, P., "Darius in Scythia", *AJAH* 12 (1987), p. 139, n. 3.
2. Hdt. 4.1, 118-9.
3. Hdt. 3.134. On the Herodotus' ascriptions see Macan, R.W., *Herodotus II* (London-New York 1895), pp. 39-40.
4. For views on the causes and critical analysis see Bury, J.B., "The European expedition of Darius", *CR* 11 (1897), p. 281; Macan, R.W., *Herodotus II* (London-New York 1895), pp. 40-42, 48-49; *CHI* 2, p. 190 (T. Sulimirski) and p. 301; A.R. Burn-Minns, E.H., *Scythians and Greeks* (Cambridge 1913), p.117.
5. Bury, J.B., "The European expedition of Darius", *CR* 11 (1897), pp. 281-82; Georges, P., "Darius in Scythia", *AJAH* 12 (1987), p. 100. On the Agathyrsoi see Hdt. 4.104.
6. Hdt. 4.83.
7. Ctesias *Persica* 16. For reservations concerning this issue see Cook, J.M., *The Persian empire* (London 1983), pp. 62-63. The view that this was a combined operation with the invasion of Darius see Georges, P., "Darius in Scythia", *AJAH* 12 (1987) pp. 133-34. The successful campaign against the Scythians is mentioned on one of Darius' inscriptions in Behistun and in Polyæn. 7.11.6, 7.12. This is thought to have taken place a few years earlier in modern Turkestan, Wade-Gery, H.T., "Miltiades", *JHS* 71 (1951), pp. 215, n. 14.
8. Hdt. 4.87.
9. Hdt. 4.137-8.
10. Hdt. 4.97. A few years later he becomes the tyrant of Mytilene, Hdt. 5.11.
11. Bury, J.B., "The European expedition of Darius", *CR* 11(1897), p. 278.
12. Hdt. 4.85-89.
13. Hdt. 4.89-96.
14. Hdt. 4.97-98.
15. Macan, R.W., *Herodotus II* (London-New York 1895), pp. 44-46; *CHI* 2, p. 302 (A.R. Burn). It appears rather unlikely and naïve of Darius to decide to cut off this possible route of return (or possible retreat) and loose communication with his rear in an area he had just conquered -more so considering he was about to advance in unknown lands- and order the disbanding of the imperial fleet. It is equally unlikely that he was persuaded instantly to change his military plans by a general from Mytilene and postpone the dismantling of the bridge for sixty days, thus allowing the Ionian fleet ample time to abandon him after this period of time had expired.



16. Hdt. 4.102, 118-36. On the events in Scythia see Macan, R.W., *Herodotus II* (London-New York 1895), pp. 47-48; *CHI 2*, pp. 190-1 (T. Sulimirski); Minns, E.H., *Scythians and Greeks* (Cambridge 1913), pp. 116-17; Cook, J.M., *The Persian empire* (London 1983), p. 63; Georges, P., "Darius in Scythia", *AJAH* 12 (1987), pp. 124-132. According to Ctesias' *Persica* 17, the campaign lasted 15 days and Darius lost 80,000 men, abandoning his rear-guard in Scythia. According to Herodotus the campaign lasted a little over 60 days and claims the sick, injured and less mobile troops were left behind.
17. Hdt. 4.128, 133.
18. Hdt. 4.136-42.
19. On Miltiades see Bury, J.B., "The European expedition of Darius", *CR* 11 (1897), pp. 278-79; Macan, R.W., *Herodotus II* (London-New York 1895), pp. 46-47, 57; *CHI 2*, p. 302 (A.R. Burn) Minns, E.H., *Scythians and Greeks* (Cambridge 1913), p. 117; Wade-Gery, H.T., "Miltiades", *JHS* 71 (1951), p. 215. Miltiades retained his position in Chersonesus; in fact it was through his safe lands that Darius made his way back to Asia, which would have been impossible if he had indeed proposed the destruction of the bridge.
20. Hdt. 5.1, 26-27. On the events at the Danube and the revolt see Bury, J.B., "The European expedition of Darius" *CR* 11(1897), pp. 278-79, 282; Macan, R.W., *Herodotus II* (London-New York 1895), pp. 44-48 and pp. 56-57; *CHI 2*, pp. 302-3 (A.R. Burn).
21. Hdt. 4. 143.
22. Hdt. 6.40.

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	Darius' Empire http://www.livius.org/a/1/maps/persia_map.gif



Scythian Expedition 513/12 B.C.

<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~ancientpersia/campaign.html>

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 *satrapia*, 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 klima (=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.

Sources

Herodotus, *Histories* 4-6.