

The Beginnings of an Avalanche

What could have been, had Aristagoras not screamed

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"I've been studying history," Peter said. "I've been learning things about patterns in human behavior. There are times when the world is rearranging itself, and at times like that, the right words can change the world. Think what Pericles did in Athens, and Demosthenes – "

"Yes, they managed to wreck Athens twice."

"Pericles, yes, but Demosthenes was right about Philip – "

"Or provoked him – "

"See? This is what historians usually do, quibble about cause and effect when the point is, there are times when the world is in flux and the right voice in the right place can move the world." (Card)

Never is the world as fluid and changeable as when mankind moves to war. In the sixth century BC, the peoples of Persia were evolving from nation to empire, marching across the Middle East and swallowing everything in their path. In the space of a few decades, Cyrus the Great and his descendents conquered Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria, Thrace, the Babylonian Empire, and parts of Asia Minor, extending the control of the Persian king from the Mediterranean to the Indus River. But as the Persians seemed on the verge of solidifying the largest human empire ever seen to that time, they were halted in their tracks by a tiny group of island nations spurred to war by the cries of their subjugated colonies. From the moment the Athenians launched a fleet to free the Lydians, the Greeks were committed to a path of total warfare that eventually led to the defeat of the Persian military, and Persian expansionism. The Athenians, however, had not seemed to care much about the invasion and subjugation of their colonies at first; indeed, the Lydian colonies had been conquered by Croesus nearly fifteen years before, and had been ruled for years without protest from their citizens or their parent nation. So what made this set of rulers intolerable?

The Tyrant of Miletus, a man named Aristagoras who was installed in Lydia to rule under the Persian king, urged the Persians to make an attack on Naxos not long after

they conquered Lydia. His advice was heeded, but the attack failed utterly, and Aristagoras, fearing retribution for the failure, decided that he would be safest if he cut himself off from the Persian government. He urged the natives and the conquered Greek colonists to begin a rebellion, and went to mainland Greece to gather support. Though he was rejected by the Spartans, the Athenians agreed to help, and thus the Persian Wars began.

What if, instead of fomenting a revolution and calling for help, Aristagoras had simply waited for the consequences of his advice (or, alternately, what if his rebellion had failed and none of the mainland Greeks had been willing to help out)? What if, in other words, his “right voice at the right place” had never existed?

First, without Aristagoras’s push, it is highly unlikely that Athens or any other nation would ever have had cause to open hostilities with the Persian Empire. The Persian yoke lay lightly on the conquered nations, as a result of the philosophies of its founder, Cyrus the Great. Cyrus, who lived in Persia from 590 to 529 BC, was at the forefront of the Empire’s earliest expansion. His Persia was the first government built on ethics, with policies of returning prisoners to their homelands, allowing popular local leaders to maintain their positions, forbidding execution for first-time offenses, and establishing a constitution and a judicial system. (Marvasti) So powerful were the Persians (and so little were the common people affected by their rule) that no rebellion ever gained popular support and no nearby nation ever dared declare war. It took Aristagoras’s fear and power to start and maintain a rebellion, and without his use of his position to spread the word and gain Athenian support, the Persian government would not have been challenged from without or within for a long time. Indeed, enough people led better lives under Persian rule that without Aristagoras’s powerful influence, that *other* rebellions-to-be might even have been shouted down by the “oppressed.”

Obviously, then, had Aristagoras held his tongue, the Persian Wars would not have begun in 499 BC with the revolt of Lydia and the sacking of Sardis by the Athenians. The Persians would never have retaliated against the Greeks in haste and been bested at Marathon, and there would have been no ten-year retreat and recoup before the attack on Salamis, where the Persians were finally defeated. Instead, the wars would have begun in a vastly different manner.

The Persians had been growing for decades basically without limit, which indicates both that they were adept at warfare and that they were firmly expansionist in mindset and policy. By the beginnings of the fifth century BC, the Empire extended from Turkey to Afghanistan and up through western Russia, and included Egypt and much of India. (Gill)



Without the sacking of Sardis to take them by surprise and force their hand, the Persians would have most likely spread deeper into Egypt and Eurasia before attempting to attack Greece. These areas were much more vulnerable to Persia's armies because they could be reached by land, and would have been easily taken by the now-expert invaders. After consolidating their hold on the conquered nations – not a difficult thing to do, if you remember how gently they ruled – they could slowly amass and prepare their armies for the Greek campaign. There is no doubt that the Athenians and the Spartans would have been targets; as powerful peoples located in extremely desirable places, the Persians would not have been foolish enough to leave them so close to their borders where they could cause trouble. There was also the allure of unifying all of the eastern Mediterranean under one government, a task that could not be completed without the subjugation of Greece. Had it not been for Aristagoras beginning the war a decade too soon, the Persians, after leisurely building up their forces and studying the terrain and tactics of the region, would have swept into Greece with the full might of their Empire. Under these circumstances, the Athenians and the Spartans would never have stood a chance; most of the battles in the Persian Wars were

won as the Greeks exploited poor Persian planning and took advantage of their superior knowledge of the geography. Had the Persians not rushed into battle by the need to punish an upstart border nation whose capabilities were largely unknown, they would have fought much more efficiently and ultimately would have won.

This victory would have had two critical effects on the future of western civilization. The first, of course, is cultural – the obliteration of ancient Greece as we know it. None of the classical history that we associate with ancient Greece would have existed; instead, our history books would tell of the greatness of ancient Persia. As one writer puts it,

“For the Athenians, the battle at Marathon was their greatest achievement. From Marathon onwards, the Athenians began to think of themselves as the center of Greek culture and Greek power. This pride, or chauvinism, was the foundation on which much of their cultural achievements were built. The first great dramas, for instance, were the dramas of Aeschylus; the principle subject of these dramas is the celebration of Athenian greatness. The great building projects of the latter half of the fifth century were motivated by the need to display Athenian wealth, greatness, and power.” (Hooker)

One can easily draw parallels with the United States after the World Wars, particularly World War II. Without both the motivation of the victory at Marathon and the peaceful aftermath given to them by it, the Golden Age of Athens (in which architecture reached its highest form, in which Socrates taught Plato and ensured the lineage of philosophy, and in which Athenian democracy proved itself to be a lasting and viable form of government) would never have come about. War was the great motivation behind advances in technology and shipbuilding, as well, and a swift Persian victory would have removed the motivation for thinkers to turn their minds to improving crafts.

Instead of being run by Athenian democracy and Spartan government guided by Greek religion, the islands would have fallen under the rule of appointed tyrants (like Aristagoras himself). Subjugated nations were controlled through a vast provincial system by regional governors known as satraps. Greece, far from being able to consider itself the cultural and intellectual center of the world, would have rapidly become just another territory in the vast Empire. Provinces were fairly autonomous and their preexisting systems rarely changed, but they were also utterly subservient to the will of

the satraps and the king, lest they feel the punishment of the military. Greek religion would have died soon thereafter, too, for despite the Persian policy for religious freedom, the Greeks would have found themselves surrounded by and ruled by pre-Zoroastrians, members of the Persian religion based on dualism. Cultural diffusion alone would have conquered the old polytheism, and along with it that peculiar sense of individualism that comes with being able to choose your own god. Deprived of both their religion and their government, the Greeks' "spirit of democracy" would have rapidly faded into the Persian mindset:

"Although the Persians did not regard their king as a god, everything about him was meant to emphasize his grandeur and superiority to ordinary mortals. His purple robes were of the most splendid fabric; red carpets were spread for him alone to walk upon; his servants held their hands before their mouths in his presence to muffle their breath so that he would not have to breathe the same air; he was depicted as larger than any other human being in the sculpture adorning his palace." (Martin)

It is hard to imagine the embryo of modern democracy surviving in writings or concrete systems for very long under this philosophy. All the texts and evidence we have today from which we have extrapolated the details of Greek society would have been replaced by Persian artifacts; histories rewritten, architecture re-envisioned, language gradually changed. Eventually, it is not hard to imagine, the Greeks would even consider themselves Persians, and the culture of the Greeks would have survived among the Persians only in the form of what scattered fragments were absorbed.

The second major effect of Aristagoras's silence and the resultant Greek defeat is even more significant and far-reaching. Consider: it was Greece's lucky victory that first defeated the Persian war machine and shook their confidence in their expansion; it was Greece's defiance of the Persian Empire that first showed the conquered lands that their new government was not infallible. Greece's victories shook the Empire to its core, and in the following centuries, set the precedent for revolt after revolt which weakened the king's hegemony until Alexander swept through in the fourth century BC.

Had the Persian armies defeated Greece, however, then all of the nations from India to modern day Albania would have been united under a government that had *never suffered a significant defeat*. Without the Aristagorian precedent for revolt, the Persian

Empire, with its gentle treatment of conquered lands, would have eventually assimilated all of the cultures and peoples within its borders, and in time – through trade, migration, and cooperation – become a single homogenous entity. Such an empire would not have been susceptible to Alexander's armies in the way the Persians, Egyptians, and Greeks were individually and would have survived much longer. The effect this would have had on history is tremendous.

Let it be assumed, for the sake of discussion, that the Persian policy of light rule and non-interference would have allowed the best traits of every nation to spread through cultural diffusion to the rest of Persia (this is not as contradictory to the previous statements about Greece as it might seem at first glance – the cultural advances of the Athenians and the Spartans could easily moderate and temper the overall Persian philosophy without surviving in Greece itself). As a conglomerate nation containing within it the ingredients of Persia, Egypt, Sparta, Babylon, Macedonia, and Athens, the Persian Empire would have been a rich melting pot of knowledge and philosophy. The Egyptian mastery of surgery and medicine would have eventually percolated throughout the land, along with the Athenian skill for architecture and design. Greek, Egyptian, and Hebrew religions would have combined with the Zoroastrian and Mesopotamian heritages either to create a spectacular religious diversity, protected under the laws of Cyrus, or to create a new, blended faith of all peoples in the Persian Empire. Athenian and Spartan ideals of democracy would have combined with the Egyptian's belief in the equality of women and the parent Persian abhorrence of slaves to create a modern, balanced government led by a strong, central government kept in check by the need to remain popular with literally hundreds of millions of citizens, yet capable of controlling them all from a single capital.

Secondly, the blending of the military might of this handful of empires would have yielded a world-taming force of men powerful on both land and sea, in all terrains and all climates. The Egyptian knowledge of the ways of the desert; the Athenians' penchant for shipbuilding, the Spartan legacy for toughness and military service; the Persian might tried and trained in the test of conquest ... all would have lent their strengths to the overall might of the Empire. Such an army would be capable of turning back all attackers, and would perhaps be strong enough to have survived even into modern times. Had Alexander come to exist in this alternate reality and encountered

this nation on the field of battle, even he would have likely been defeated, or at least stalemated.

Obviously, the defeat of the Greeks, though negative in the transient, temporary framework discussed above, could have led to the creation of a pre-AD superpower. Had Aristagoras held his tongue or been ignored, the Persian Empire, rather than being stopped in its tracks, would likely have actually gathered momentum, swallowing up empires and uniting all of western humanity under a single civilization. Such a golden turn of events would have been so far-reaching that the present face of history would be utterly unknowable; who can imagine what advances such a unified ancient civilization would have made? Of course, all of this is mere theory and projection, but it is interesting to see how logically everything could have fallen into place, with the absence of one cause leaving such a grand effect. An empire such as the one the Persians could have built could have abolished war, racism, and language barriers, and produced all of the modern philosophy and thought that we have today, only done it thousands of years ago. It is a sobering thought, that the actions of one man, desperate to save himself from the consequences of his own poor advice, could have prevented such a utopian government from coming about without even being aware of the possibilities. After all, Aristagoras had no idea he was beginning a rebellion that would eventually lead the Persian military to total defeat; he was simply trying to save his own skin. Watching the causes and effects line up certainly makes one wonder, though: what will be the difference in tomorrow, if today I decide this way or that?

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- I also did research (unquoted and unparaphrased in writing) in Hause and the Sources book.