

Delius of Plutarch and Dias of Flavius Philostratus: On the Political Activities of Platonists in the Fourth Century BC

Maxim M. KHOLOD¹

Abstract. *The present paper evaluates from the point of view of historical credibility two passages, that of Plutarch (Adv. Colot., 32.1126d) and that of Flavius Philostratus (Vitae soph., 485-486), where respectively Delius and Dias appear. The first of the persons, as is claimed, especially influenced Alexander the Great and the second did Philip II in the matter of the war against Persia. The author argues that in contrast to Philostratus' report, Plutarch's account can well be accepted (albeit not without reservations) as credible.*

Rezumat. *Acest studiu evaluează, dintr-un punct de vedere istoric, credibilitatea a două pasaje literare: cel al lui Plutarh (Adv. Colot., 32.1126d) și cel al lui Flavius Philostratus (Vitae soph., 485-486). Mai exact, este vorba despre cele în care apar numele lui Delius și Dias. Primul dintre cei doi ar fi fost o influență importantă asupra lui Alexandru cel Mare, iar cel de-al doilea ar fi fost responsabil de sfătuirea lui Filip al II-lea în vederea războiului împotriva Persiei. Autorul sugerează că, spre deosebire de informațiile oferite de Philostratus, cele venite din partea lui Plutarh pot fi cu ușurință acceptate (deși nu fără anumite rezerve) ca fiind credibile.*

Keywords: Plutarch, Flavius Philostratus, Philip II, Alexander the Great, Greek cities in Asia Minor.

Both Plutarch and Flavius Philostratus write, each in a separate passage, about the special impact that those from the Academy, the Ephesians, had on the Macedonian kings' decisions to wage war against Persia.² Apart from several other details, these accounts differ from one another in that Plutarch states this representative of the Academy to have been Delius, while according to Philostratus, it was Dias. Besides, the Macedonian king mentioned by Plutarch is Alexander the Great, whereas Philostratus records that it was Philip II. The passages are as follows:

¹ St. Petersburg State University, Institute of History, Dept. of the History of Ancient Greece and Rome; mmkholod@yandex.ru; m.holod@spbu.ru.

² All dates are BC/BCE unless otherwise noted.

“And the emissary sent to Alexander by the Greeks of Asia, who more than any other kindled his ardour and spurred him on to take up the war against the barbarians, was Delius of Ephesus, a follower of Plato” (Plut. *Adv. Colot.*, 32.1126d).³

(transl. Ph.H. De Lacy, Loeb)

“Dias of Ephesus made fast the cable of his philosophy to the Academy, but he was held to be a sophist for the following reason. When he saw that Philip was treating the Greeks harshly, he persuaded him to lead an expedition against Asia, and went to and fro telling the Greeks that they ought to accompany Philip on his expedition, since it was no dishonour to endure slavery abroad in order to secure freedom at home” (Philostr. *Vitae soph.*, 485–486).⁴

(transl. W.C. Wright, Loeb)

In the present essay, I intend to assess these passages in terms of historical credibility.

To begin with, it should be pointed out that, apart from the information these two passages provide, we know nothing about either Delius or Dias, and this fact seems to give us a compelling reason to believe that the renown the two people enjoyed in their lifetime, if, of course, they existed at all (see below), was quite modest. That alone is already enough to regard as implausible the statement occurring in both passages that such persons were the instigators of the Macedonian kings’ decisions to wage war on Persia. But the main point in this connection is the following. It is quite clear that influencing such decisions made by the Macedonian kings would prove impossible for anybody, even for Isocrates in the case of Philip. There is no doubt that both Philip’s decision to start a war with Persia and Alexander’s decision to continue this war were their fully independent decisions.⁵

Nevertheless, it does not follow from this that the Macedonian kings did not have any contacts, including personal meetings, with some Greek intellectuals and could not have discussed, *inter alia*, the issue of the war against Persia with them, because through Isocrates’ efforts this issue had gained widespread popularity in the intellectual milieu, as well as in Greek society in general (Isocrates’ letters to Philip are the best-known proof of the existence of such contacts). Therefore communication between Philip and Alexander and such people as Delius or Dias does not appear unlikely in and of itself. However, in our case it appears that these episodes should not be considered as both having really taken place. Indeed, while comparing the above-mentioned passages, one can notice some striking similarities which do not seem to have occurred by accident. Rather, they lead us to believe that what Plutarch and Philostratus

³ ὁ δὲ πεμφθεὶς πρὸς Ἀλέξανδρον ὑπὸ τῶν ἐν Ἀσίᾳ κατοικοῦντων Ἑλλήνων καὶ μάλιστα διακαύσας καὶ παροξύνας ἄψασθαι τοῦ πρὸς τοὺς βαρβάρους πολέμου Δῆλιος ἦν Ἐφέσιος, ἑταῖρος Πλάτωνος.

⁴ Δίας δὲ ὁ Ἐφέσιος τὸ μὲν πείσμα τῆς ἑαυτοῦ φιλοσοφίας ἐξ Ἀκαδημίας ἐβέβλητο, σοφιστῆς δὲ ἐνομίσθη διὰ τὸδε: τὸν Φίλιππον ὀρῶν χαλεπὸν ὄντα τοῖς Ἑλλήσιν ἐπὶ τὴν Ἀσίαν στρατεῦναι ἔπεισε, καὶ πρὸς τοὺς Ἕλληνας διεξῆλθε λέγων, ὡς δέον ἀκολουθεῖν στρατεύοντι, καλὸν γὰρ εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἕξω δουλεῦναι ἐπὶ τῷ οἴκῳ ἐλευθεροῦσθαι.

⁵ FROLOV 2001, 522–527; cf. MARKLE 1976, 80–89; ISAYEVA 1994, 165–173.

write about is the same event and not two separate ones: in addition to the statement that both Delius and Dias attempted to persuade the Macedonian kings to start a war against Persia, it is said that they were both Platonists, both Ephesians, and even their names bear a certain similarity to each other (they are relatively short and starting with the same letter).⁶ If it is true, a legitimate question then arises: which of the two passages should be recognized as being the record of an event that actually happened?

In my opinion, preference should be given to Plutarch's account in this case. Along with the fact that Plutarch in general is much more trustworthy than Philostratus in terms of conveying historical information (although at times his narrative does contain inaccuracies), another thing should be noted as well. Philostratus' Dias, with his promotion of the idea of it being necessary to wage war on Persia in order for the Greeks to be free in their native land, in fact completely follows the Panhellenic program of Isocrates. And it is quite noteworthy that further on, in his account of Isocrates' life, Philostratus makes absolutely no mention of his efforts to enlist Philip's help to organize such a military campaign (*Vitae soph.*, 503–506). Taking this fact into account, one should raise the question whether Philostratus might have mistakenly ascribed the activities carried out by Isocrates to Dias, knowing from his source that Dias communicated with the Macedonian king regarding the war against Persia. Incidentally, if so, it becomes clear why this Macedonian king in Philostratus' passage is none other than Philip. At any rate, it is obvious that all this is not conducive to enhancing the credibility of Philostratus' account. Lastly, it is remarkable that in his narrative Philostratus confines himself to conveying general historical information, which serves as nothing more than the background to the sophistic position of Dias, while the passage of Plutarch contains a number of specific details. Moreover, due to the presence of such details, Plutarch's account may be put into a more particular historical context than what Philostratus writes, and this also argues for its preferability.⁷

Indeed, Plutarch's words that Delius was "sent to Alexander by the Greeks of Asia" attest to his connection with the Greek cities in Asia Minor. Besides, given Plutarch's reference to Delius as an Ephesian (Philostratus' description of Dias as an Ephesian is further confirmation of his origin), one may suggest that at that time Delius was active mainly in Ephesus. On the other hand, one can infer from the account of Plutarch that the meeting between Alexander and Delius should have taken place before the Macedonian king launched his campaign against Persia, i.e. between October 336, when he ascended the throne,⁸ and the spring 334. Therefore it is clear that Delius' visit to Alexander, as described by Plutarch, should be considered in the

⁶ Cf. NATORP 1901, 2446; BERVE 1926, 131, n. 251; TRAMPEDACH 1994, 101.

⁷ Cf. TRAMPEDACH 1994, 101.

⁸ On this date, see especially HATZOPOULOS 1982, 21–42.

context of events occurring in the Greek cities in western Asia Minor, and in Ephesus in particular, in that period of time.

These events were connected with the military operations conducted in western Asia Minor starting from the spring 336 by the Macedonian expeditionary corps – the advance-guard of the army which under Philip's command was supposed to invade Persia some time later. Although, as is well-known, Philip's plans were thwarted, the advance-guard was not withdrawn by the new king Alexander, but it remained in Asia Minor until he arrived there in 334.

During the first year of the campaign the Macedonian expeditionary corps managed to achieve considerable successes: if not all, then the majority of Greek cities on the coast of Asia Minor from Cyzicus in the north to Ephesus (or even Magnesia-on-the-Maeander) in the south fell under Macedonian control. What happened in Ephesus at that time as well as in the following year, one can learn from Arrian (*Anab.*, I, 17, 9–12). According to him, the city's siding with the Macedonians was attended by overthrowing the rule of the pro-Persian oligarchs and establishing democracy. It is unclear whether Heropythus, one of the leaders of the Ephesian democrats, who was mentioned by Arrian, died in this struggle or soon after that. At any rate, it is known that he received from the winning democratic faction a tomb at the *agora* and possibly even honours paid to him as a hero. Besides, in the famous temple of Artemis the Ephesian democrats erected a statue of Philip II, which may be considered as a token of gratitude of the new government to the Macedonian king for some help in overthrowing the oligarchic regime and also as an attempt to solicit his favour and protection in the future. However, in 335 the situation on the west coast of Asia Minor changed dramatically. The Persians launched a successful counteroffensive there. As a result, all the Greek cities in Asia Minor, controlled by the Macedonians earlier, with the exception of Abydos (and maybe Rhoeteum), were brought back under the Great king's authority and thus, pro-Persian oligarchies and tyrannies were restored in them. The same Arrian speaks (see above) that at that time Ephesus surrendered to Memnon, a famous Rhodian mercenary general in the Persian service, who installed a garrison in the city and facilitated the establishment of an oligarchy run by Syrophax and his family. On having seized power, the oligarchs immediately plundered the temple of Artemis, threw down Philip's statue in it, profaned Heropythus' tomb at the *agora* and inflicted penalties on the pro-Macedonian democrats, forcing them into exile and possibly even executing some of them.⁹

It cannot be ruled out that at the time of Delius' meeting with Alexander the former was one of the Ephesian exiles. Indeed, it is highly improbable that Delius was officially sent to Alexander by the Greeks of Asia Minor collectively, as follows from the account of Plutarch, for

⁹ For a detailed account of the events, see KHOLOD 2018, 407–446. In addition, on the statue of Philip in the Artemisium, see KHOLOD 2016, 497, n. 7.

there is nothing to indicate that they could take any action jointly and in concert at that time. It is quite possible that Delius acted either on his own initiative or, which is more likely, on behalf of his pro-Macedonian fellow citizens while presenting himself as a spokesman for the whole Greek community in Asia Minor. It should not surprise us that in this case Delius would have acted as an adherent of democracy, a form of government which should not be able to command the respect of a disciple of Plato, or at least, should not be actively supported by him (cf. Plato *Resp.*, 557a–558c).¹⁰ Indeed, the crux of the matter seems to be not Delius' abstract sympathies or antipathies towards some form of government, but rather his implacable opposition, as a graduate of the Academy too, to the barbarians' dominion over the Greeks (cf. Plato *Resp.*, 469b–c; 470c–d; 471b) or, to be precise, to the Persians' dominion over the Greek cities in Asia Minor, including Ephesus. In my view, that alone was enough to compel Delius to side with the Ephesian democrats – the political force that was decidedly anti-Persian in his home city. On the other hand, there appears to be one more factor that should be taken into account in this context. The fact is that, regarding the representatives and graduates of the Academy, one has to distinguish between philosophers proper (such as Speusippus, Xenocrates, Aristotle and naturally Plato himself) and young elitist men, who, similar to Isocrates' disciples, joined Plato's school mainly to further their education. When the latter (those of the outer circle of the Academy, so to say) returned to their native cities, they could be involved in local politics, not acting as Platonists but rather as scions of their influential families, and as such they could support democracy if need be. For instance, Leo of Byzantium and Euphraeus of Oreus did exactly that, becoming pro-democracy politicians in their home cities.¹¹ That could be the case with Delius as well.

If Delius actually paid a visit to Alexander while already in exile, this meeting should have taken place sometime in the winter 335/4 or in early spring 334. But it cannot be ruled out that the visit was made earlier – either at the end of 336, when Philip's demise must have caused fear among the Ephesian democrats (whose representative Delius could have been) that the new young king would postpone or even abandon the war against Persia,¹² or in the autumn 335, when the defeats suffered by the Macedonian advance-guard put democracy in Ephesus at risk. At any rate, it is worth believing that the purpose of Delius' visit to Alexander was first and foremost to enlist the king's help to solve the Ephesian matters or, to be more exact, to determine the fate of the pro-Macedonian democratic regime – to support it if it still existed at that time, or to restore it later on if it had already been overthrown. However, it is likely that Delius was concurrently expressing the expectations common for a significant number of the

¹⁰ In more detail: SANTAS 2007, 70–89; MARSHALL 2009, 93–105; TOPALOĞLU 2014, 73–83.

¹¹ TRAMPEDACH 1994, 93–100.

¹² Cf. BERVE 1926, 131, n. 251; BOSWORTH 1980, 131; TRAMPEDACH 1994, 101; FLOWER 2000, 107, n. 50; HECKEL 2006, 106.

Greeks in Asia Minor – those of Alexander as *hegemon* of the Hellenic League to deliver them as soon as possible from the ignominy of being controlled by the Persian barbarians, which, as I suppose, is reflected in a rather garbled fashion in Plutarch's words of Delius' sending to the Macedonian king by these Greeks collectively.

In conclusion, it seems that the offered analysis of the two passages of Plutarch and Philostratus from a historical point of view allows one to think that, despite their apparent discrepancies, they describe the same event. However, in my opinion, preference should be given to Plutarch's passage since he provides a more credible report of the event (although not a completely accurate one). Thus, there is no need to agree with the scholars casting doubt on the veracity of Plutarch's account in general.¹³ On the contrary, it should be considered as supplying valuable information which, if viewed critically, gives us a better understanding of the processes taking place in the Greek cities in Asia Minor and especially in Ephesus shortly before the Asian expedition of Alexander.

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¹³ See e.g. GEHRKE 1985, 59, n. 22; BRUNT 1993, 291.

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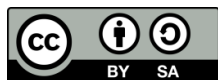
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