

THE ASSASSINATION OF PRINCE SMERDIS AND THE KINGSHIP OF HIS IMPOSTER

By Brandon “Buddy” Cole, CG
Golgotha Commandery No. 7
Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of Utah
12 June 2025

Introduction

In the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross (*IORC*), we are informed of events surrounding the successive changes of rulers over the Israelitish people, ranging from Nebuchadnezzar II of the Babylonian Empire through to Darius the Great of the Persian Empire.

One of these rulers is named Smerdis, who is referenced as an usurper of the throne before overthrown by the seven great families. We are not given any background on who Smerdis was in the IORC ceremony, nor is he mentioned (anywhere that I can find, anyway) in the Holy Bible.

Who was Smerdis? What gave him claim over the throne of Persia? Why is he called an usurper in the ceremony of the IORC? How long did he reign as King? How was he overthrown? We will attempt to resolve these questions, relying upon accounts given by Herodotus, by Ctesias of Cnidus, and by Darius the Great himself.

Who Was Smerdis?

Ancient historians give us two personages to whom this name applies, and for purposes of clarity we will differentiate them as follows: Smerdis (also called “Pirtiya,” “Bardiya,” Barzia,” “Bardiya,” and “Tanyoxarces”) and Gaumata (who is also called “Sphendadates,” “Oropastes,” and “Pseudo-Smerdis”).

Smerdis (Bardiya)

Smerdis was one of the two sons of Cyrus the Great, the other being his older brother Cambyses II. He was a Prince of the Persian Empire and was well-known for his physical prowess.

In preparation for his own death, Cyrus made Cambyses his successor as King; he then made Smerdis the Satrap (or Governor) of the eastern provinces (lands inhabited by the Bactrians, the Choramnians, the Parthians, and the Carmanians) without ever having to pay tribute to Cambyses. Cambyses died in 530 BC, at which time Cambyses ascended the throne and went on to conquer the Egyptian lands.

We learn from both Ctesius and Herodotus that, on some occasion after this time, a magus called Sphandadates visited Cambyses with some shocking news: that Smerdis was planning some nefarious plot against Cambyses; Ctesius also informs us that Smerdis had previously flogged Sphandadates as a penalty for some wrong committed.

As time went on, Sphandadates piled on more slanders about Smerdis. As evidence of this supposed plot, he told Cambyses that Smerdis would not come visit if Cambyses commanded. Cambyses sent word to Smerdis twice commanding that he must visit his court; however, Smerdis was busy attending other matters and did not come.

Cambyses invited his brother Smerdis to visit him, which Smerdis followed up upon. By this time, however, Cambyses was convinced of the supposed plot; though warmly welcoming his brother, Cambyses by this time was planning to have his little brother killed. Smerdis was killed rather quickly and quietly.

Gaumata (Pseudo-Smerdis)

According to Ctesius, to hide their crime both from the public and from his mother, King Cambyses arranged to have Sphendadates (or Gaumata) impersonate his brother, as they were similar in appearance.

Herodotus differs in his account, indicating that Cambyses, envious of Smerdis's strength and fearful from a dream or vision that he had that Smerdis would one day ascend the throne over all of Persia, ordered a servant or counselor named Prexaspes to assassinate Smerdis and afterwards was able to keep it secret.

Darius's account agrees with that of Herodotus, with the exception that he indicates that Cambyses had Smerdis killed prior to Cambyses Egyptian campaign.

Darius also indicates that a Magian priest named Gaumata (who was similar in appearance to Smerdis) usurped the Satrapy (or Governorship) over the eastern provinces by assuming the name and character of Smerdis and ascend the throne over the eastern provinces. Herodotus indicates a similar account, although he refers to Gaumata as "Oropastes."

Reign

We also have differing accounts on how Gaumata came to rule over the entirety of Persia.

Ctesius informs us that Cambyses was whittling a piece of wood one day, accidentally cut himself in the thigh, and died about a week and a half later from infection. He had reigned eighteen years.

Herodotus offers an alternate account that, Cambyses, knowing the real Smerdis to be dead, and learning of this new Smerdis, puts together his army to go put down the usurper; in mounting his horse, he sustained a wound from the point of his sword and dies a few days later.

Other accounts in general indicate that Cambyses, while traveling through Eber-Nari (which was located within the region known today as Syria) received a wound to his thigh, which became infected with gangrene, resulting in his death three weeks later.

Regardless, these accounts indicate that Gautama (under the assumed name and character of “Smerdis) ascended the throne of Persia and proclaimed himself King in 522 BC.

Death of Gautama

The general indicates to us that, in September of that same year, the following seven nobles visited the so-called “King Smerdis”:

- Otanes
- Intaphrenes
- Gobryas
- Hydarnes
- Megabyzus
- Aspathines
- Darius

At the fortress of Sikayauvati (a stronghold in the region of Media or northwestern Iran), while the other five engaged the guards, Darius and Megabyzus killed Gaumata. After days of discussion, these nobles decided on Darius becoming king.

Herodotus offers that, after Cambyses death, Otanes (a nobleman) suspects Smerdis to be an imposter, believing it to be another person by the same name and of similar appearance. He sends his daughter Phaedyia (or Phaidyme) as a part of Smerdis’s harem to confirm whether this is true. Knowing this other Smerdis’s ears to have been cut off by order of Cyrus as a penalty for a crime, he has her check to see whether he has ears. She informs him that he does not have any ears. Otanes then gathers six fellow noblemen (including Darius) to attack the home of and kill the King.

Modern Skepticism

Although such accounts were traditionally held as history for millennia, most modern historians believe that the reigning Smerdis was, in fact, truly the son of Cyrus the Great and the younger brother of CambysesII, and that Darius invented the tale of Cambyses’ conspiracy in order to justify his killing of Smerdis for his own ascension of the throne. Points of dispute include:

- That Phaedyia was the only one of Smerdis's wives to supposedly spot the difference between the real Smerdis and the pseudo-Smerdis.
- That Darius often accused rivals of being imposters (including Nebuchadnezzar III).
 - The Behistun Inscription, written by Darius, includes two reliefs of different supposed imposters (Nidintu-Bêl and Arakha) of Nebuchadnezzar.

Conclusion

There existed, at the least, Smerdis the son of Cyrus the Great and younger brother of Cambyses II. There may have been an usurper who pretended to be Smerdis after the real Smerdis was killed by his brother Cambyses.

Smerdis either died at the hands of his brother Cambyses or, after less than a year on the Medo-Persian throne, by the hands of Darius the Great.

Darius the Great either killed the true Smerdis (and made up a tale about him being an imposter to justify his ascension to the throne) or truly killed an imposter, liberating the Medo-Persian peoples from the rule of a man who had committed an offense against God and man.

I would note that none of this takes away from the story of or moral lessons taught in the ceremony of the IORC. After all, we learn in the ceremony that Darius later turned away from the One True God and towards sabianism (a form of paganism); in addition, the protagonist and chief personage in the ceremony is not Darius, but Zerubbabel, who, history agrees, became a friend to Darius and secured Darius's favor and support in the rebuilding of the City and Temple of God.

Bibliography

- Behistun, minor inscriptions.* (n.d.). Livius. Retrieved from <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/behistun-persian-text/behistun-minor-inscriptions/>
- Dandamayev, M. A. (1989). *Encyclopædia Iranica* (Vol. III). (E. Yarshater, P. O. Skjærvø, M. Kasheff, & E. Whelan, Eds.) New York, New York, USA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 785-786.
- Hammond, N. G., Boardman, J., Lewis, D. M., & Ostwald, M. (Eds.). (1988). *The Cambridge Ancient History: Persia, Greece and the Western Mediterranean c. 525 to 479 B.C.* (Second ed., Vol. IV). New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 53-57.
- Herodotus* (Vol. II). (1950). (A. D. Godley, Trans.) Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, pp. 39-40; 77-115.
- Llewellyn-Jones, L. (2010). *Ctesias' History of Persia.* (J. Robson, Trans.) New York, NY, USA: Routledge, pp. 177-178.