

6.4. Herodotus / The Battle of Thermopylae

Herodotus, who not only invented the discipline of history but also told a great story, presented what happened at the Pass of Thermopylae in 480 BCE. The account of Thermopylae comes shortly after the dialogue between Demaratus and Xerxes (included above). Herodotus saw the logic of this relationship and so he came back to more dialogue between Demaratus and Xerxes concerning the Spartans here, near the end of Book 7.

Hdt. 7. Herodotus. *The History*. Trans. George Rawlinson. New York: Dutton, 1862.

While this debate was going on, Xerxes sent a mounted spy to observe the Greeks, to note how many they were, and see what they were doing. He had heard, before he came out of Thessaly, that a few men were assembled at this place, and that at their head were certain Spartans, under Leonidas, a descendant of Hercules. The horseman rode up to the camp, and looked about him, but did not see the whole army, since some were on the farther side of the wall (which had been rebuilt and was now carefully guarded). But he observed those on the outside, who were encamped in front of the rampart. It happened that at this time the Spartans held the outer guard, and were seen by the spy: some of them engaged in gymnastic exercises, others combing their long hair. At this the spy greatly marvelled, but he counted their number, and when he had taken accurate note of everything, he rode back quietly, for no one pursued after him, nor paid any attention to his visit. So he returned, and told Xerxes all that he had seen.

Upon this, Xerxes, who had no means of knowing the truth—namely, that the Spartans were preparing to do or die manfully—but thought it laughable that they should be engaged in such things. He called to his presence Demaratus the son of Ariston, who still remained with the army. When he appeared, Xerxes told him all that he had heard, and questioned him concerning the news, since he was anxious to understand the meaning of such behaviour on the part of the Spartans.

Demaratus answered, “O king, I described these men to you long ago, when we had but just begun our march upon Greece. However, you laughed at me when I told you of all this, which I saw would come to pass. Earnestly I struggle at all times to speak truth to you, sire, and now listen to it once more. These men have come to dispute the pass with us. They are preparing for the fight. It is their custom, when they are about to risk their lives, to adorn their heads with care. Be assured, however, that if you can subdue the men who are here and the Lacedaemonians who remain in Sparta, there is no other nation in all the world which will venture to lift a hand in their defense. Now, you have to deal with the strongest kingdom and town in Greece, and with the bravest men.”

To Xerxes, what Demaratus had said seemed unbelievable, so he asked, “How it was possible for so small an army to contend with mine?”

“O king!” Demaratus answered, “Let me be treated as a liar if matters fall not out as I say.”

But Xerxes was not persuaded. Four whole days he waited, expecting that the Greeks would run away. On the fifth day, seeing the Spartans still manning the pass, he assumed that their stand was simply impudence and recklessness. Xerxes grew angry. He sent the Medes and Cissians against them with orders to take them alive and bring them into his presence. The Medes rushed forward and charged the Greeks, but fell in huge numbers. Others took the places of the slain, and would not be beaten off, though they suffered terrible losses. In this way it became clear to all, and especially to the king, that though he had plenty of combatants, he had but very few warriors. The struggle went on during the whole day.

Then the Medes, having met so rough a reception, withdrew from the fight. A band of Persians under Hydarnes, whom the king called his “Immortals,” took their place. Everyone believed that the Immortals would soon finish the Spartans. But when they joined battle with the Greeks, they did no better than the Medes: Since the two armies fought in a narrow space, and the barbarians used shorter spears than the Greeks, there was no advantage in numbers. The Spartans fought in a way worthy of note, and showed themselves far more skilful in fight than their adversaries, often turning their backs, and making as though they were all fleeing, on which the barbarians would rush after them with much noise and shouting. When they caught up to the Spartans who were supposedly frightened, the Spartans would wheel around, face their pursuers, in this way destroy vast numbers of the enemy. Some Spartans likewise fell in these encounters, but only a very few. At last the Persians, finding that all their efforts to gain the pass failed, and that whether they attacked by divisions or in any other way, it was to no purpose, they withdrew to their own quarters.

During these assaults, it is said that Xerxes, who was watching the battle, thrice leaped from the throne on which he sat, in terror for his army.

Next day the combat was renewed, but with no better success on the part of the barbarians. The Greeks were so few that the barbarians hoped to find them disabled because of their wounds and ready to give up. So attacks continued. But the Greeks were drawn up in detachments according to their cities, and bore the brunt of the battle in turns—all except the Phocians, who had been stationed on the mountain to guard the pathway. So, when the Persians found no difference between that day and the preceding, they again retired to their quarters.

As the king was getting desperate and lacked a plan, Ephialtes, the son of Eurydemus, a man of Malis, came to him and was admitted to a conference. Stirred by the hope of receiving a rich reward at the king’s hands, he had come to tell him of the pathway which led across the mountain to Thermopylae, by which disclosure he brought destruction on the band of Greeks who had there withstood the barbarians. This Ephialtes afterwards, from fear of the Spartans, fled into Thessaly....

The Greeks at Thermopylae received the first warning of the destruction which the dawn would bring on them from the seer Megistias, who read their fate in the victims as he was sacrificing. After this deserters came in, and brought the news that the Persians were marching around by the hills. It was still

night when these men arrived. Last of all, the scouts came running down from the heights and brought in the same accounts at daybreak. The Greeks held a council to consider what they should do, and here opinions were divided: some were against quitting their post, while others contended to the contrary. So when the council had broken up, part of the troops departed and went their way homeward to their cities, while part stayed, prepared to stand by Leonidas to the last.

It is said that Leonidas himself sent away the troops who departed because he cared about their safety, but thought it unseemly that either he or his Spartans should quit the post which they had been singled out to guard. For my own part, I incline to think that Leonidas gave the order, because he perceived the allies to be out of heart and unwilling to encounter the danger to which his own mind was made up. He therefore commanded them to retreat, but said that he himself could not draw back with honor, knowing that if he stayed, glory awaited him, and that Sparta in that case would not lose her prosperity....

To me it seems no small argument in favour of this view, that the seer also who accompanied the army, Megistias, the Acarnanian—said to have been of the blood of Melampus, and the same who was led by the appearance of the victims to warn the Greeks of the danger which threatened them—received orders to retire (as it is certain he did) from Leonidas, that he might escape the coming destruction. Megistias, however, though bidden to depart, refused, and stayed with the army; but he had an only son present with the expedition, whom he now sent away.

So the allies, when Leonidas ordered them to retire, obeyed him and departed immediately. Only the Thespians and the Thebans remained with the Spartans; and of these the Thebans were kept back by Leonidas as hostages, very much against their will. The Thespians, on the contrary, stayed entirely of their own accord, refusing to retreat, and declaring that they would not forsake Leonidas and his followers. So they lived with the Spartans, and died with them. Their leader was Demophilus, the son of Diadromes.

At sunrise Xerxes made libations, after which he waited until the time when the forum is full, and then began his advance. Ephialtes had instructed him that the descent of the mountain is much quicker, and the distance much shorter, than the way around the hills, and the ascent. So the barbarians under Xerxes began to come near, and the Greeks under Leonidas, as they now went forth determined to die, advanced much further than on previous days, until they reached the more open portion of the pass. Before, they had held their station within the wall, and from it had gone out to fight at the point where the pass was the narrowest. Now they joined battle beyond the defile and carried slaughter to the barbarians who fell in heaps. Behind them the

captains of the squadrons, armed with whips, urged their men forward with continual blows. Many were pushed into the sea and perished. More still were trampled to death by their own soldiers. No one heeded the dying. For the Greeks, reckless of their own safety and desperate, since they knew that the mountain had been crossed and their destruction was near, exerted themselves with the most furious valor against the barbarians.

By this time the spears of most Spartans were broken, so with their swords they hewed down the ranks of the Persians. Soon, Leonidas fell fighting bravely, together with many other famous Spartans whose names I have taken care to learn on account of their great worthiness, as indeed I have those of all the three hundred. There fell too at the same time very many famous Persians: among them, two sons of Darius, Abrocomes and Hyperanthes, his children by Phratagune, the daughter of Artanes. Artanes was brother of King Darius, being a son of Hystaspes, the son of Arsames; and when he gave his daughter to the king, he made him heir likewise of all his substance, for she was his only child.

Thus two brothers of Xerxes here fought and fell. And now there arose a fierce struggle between the Persians and the Lacedaemonians over the body of Leonidas, in which the Greeks four times drove back the enemy, and at last by their great bravery succeeded in bearing off the body. This combat was scarcely ended when the Persians with Ephialtes approached. The Greeks, informed that they were coming, made a change in the manner of their fighting. Drawing back into the narrowest part of the pass, and retreating even behind the cross wall, they posted themselves upon a hillock, where they stood all drawn up together in one close body, except only the Thebans. That hill is at the entrance of the straits, where the stone lion stands which was set up in honor of Leonidas. Here they defended themselves to the last, such as still had swords using them, and the others resisting with their hands and teeth, until the barbarians, who in part had pulled down the wall and attacked them in front, in part had gone round and now encircled them upon every side, overwhelmed and buried the remnant which was left beneath showers of missile weapons.

Thus nobly did the whole body of Lacedaemonians and Thespians behave. One man is said to have distinguished himself above all the rest: Dieneces the Spartan. A speech which he made before the Greeks engaged the Medes, remains on record. One of the Trachinians told him, "Such was the number of the barbarians, that when they shot forth their arrows the sun would be darkened by their multitude." Dieneces, not at all frightened at these words, but making light of the Median numbers, answered "Our Trachinian friend brings us excellent tidings. If the Medes darken the sun, we shall have our fight in the shade."