

Gateway to Humanities

Classics

Approaching Classics through Ancient History

The Persian Wars

What were the Persian Wars?

Several Phases:

- Ionian Revolt– 499-493 BC
- 1st Persian War – Darius invades Greece – 492 (stops in Macedon), Invasion in 490 BC – Marathon
- 2nd Persian War – Xerxes invades Greece – 480 - 479
 - Thermopylae, Artemisium
 - Salamis
 - Plataea

The Historical Background

- 6th c. BC: Greeks of Asia Minor conquered by Lydians and then Persians.
- 514 BC: Darius subdues Thrace and Macedon
- 507/6: BC: Athenian alliance with Persia
- 499 BC: Ionian revolt.
 - Athenians (and Eretrians) set fire to Cybebe temple in Sardis.
- 494 BC: Siege of Miletus
- 490 BC: Siege of Eretria
 - Battle of Marathon
- 480 BC: Expedition of Xerxes:
 - Thermopylae
 - Salamis
 - Plataea (479 BC)



What are the sources for the Persian Wars?

- Historians
 - Herodotus, Diodorus, Plutarch , Thucydides (very brief)
- Literature
 - Aeschylus' *Persians*
- Archaeology
 - Dedications
 - Ancient Greco-Roman Reception

Approaching the Historians

- Ἡροδότου Ἁλικαρνησέος *ἱστορίας* ἀπόδεξις ἥδε, ὥς μήτε τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται, μήτε ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά, τὰ μὲν Ἕλλησι, τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι ἀποδεχθέντα, ἀκλεᾶ γένηται, τὰ τε ἄλλα καὶ δι' ἣν αἰτίην ἐπολέμησαν ἀλλήλοισι.

Translation:

Herodotus of Halicarnassus, his *inquiry* is here set down to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of other peoples; and more particularly, to show how they came into conflict.

Herodotus 1.1

Approaching the Historians

- Summary of Herodotus 1.1
 - Phoenicians steal Io
 - Greeks steal Medea
 - Alexander steals Helen

Such is the account which the Persians give of these matters. They trace to the attack upon Troy their ancient enmity towards the Greeks. The Phoenicians, however, as regards Io, vary from the Persian statements. They deny that they used any violence to remove her into Egypt; she herself, they say, having formed an intimacy with the captain, while his vessel lay at Argos, and perceiving herself to be with child, of her own free will accompanied the Phoenicians on their leaving the shore, to escape the shame of detection and the reproaches of her parents. Whether this latter account be true, or whether the matter happened otherwise, I shall not discuss further. I shall proceed at once to point out the person who first within my own knowledge inflicted injury on the Greeks, after which I shall go forward with my history, describing equally the greater and the lesser cities. For the cities which were formerly great have most of them become insignificant; and such as are at present powerful, were weak in the olden time. I shall therefore discourse equally of both, convinced that human happiness never continues long in one stay.

Problems with the Historians

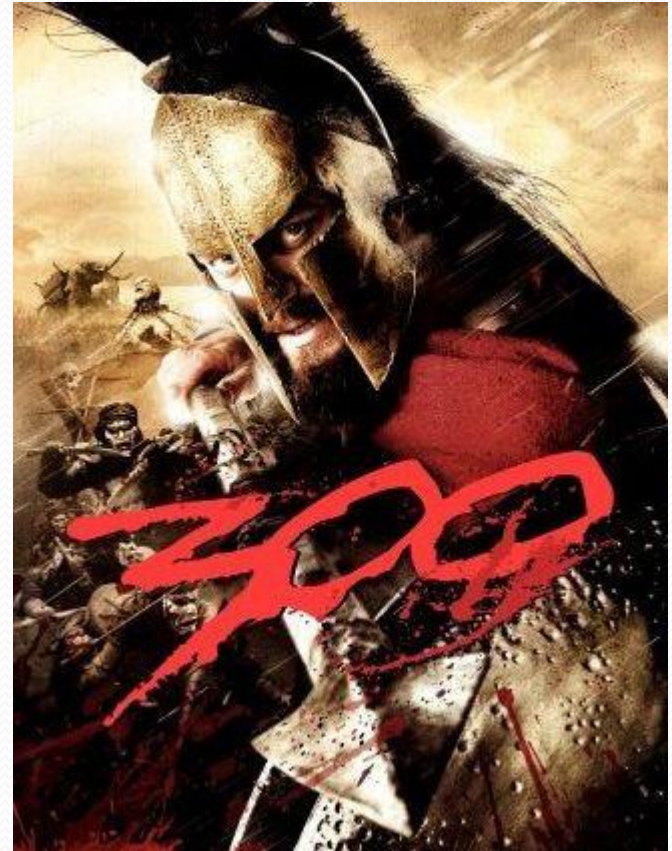
- Separation of time between accounts
- What are our historians sources?
 - Herodotus – eye witness accounts (or near to), learned men, travel, deliberate rejection of myth
 - Thucydides – eye witness accounts, personal experience, travel, written records
 - Diodorus – mostly follows Ephorus (although not entirely)

Who was Herodotus?

- Herodotus is from Halicarnassus.
- Writes mostly in Athens
- May have been involved in the settlement of Thurii (Italy)
- Questions of travel, particularly in Egypt



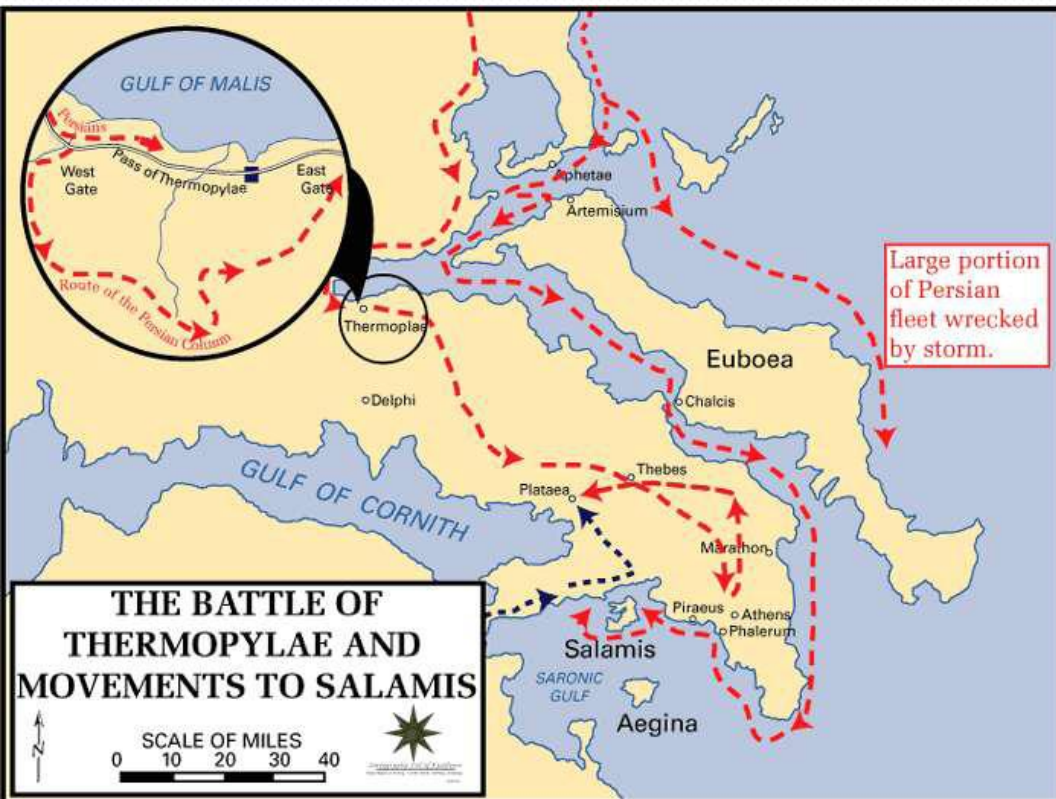
Myth and Legend



Betrayal at Thermopylae

Go tell the Spartans, thou
who passest by, That here,
obedient to their laws, we
lie.

Simonides



Troops originally present at Thermopylae

These were the Hellenes who awaited the attack of the Persian in this place: - of the Spartans three hundred hoplites; of the men of Tegea and Mantinea a thousand, half from each place, from Orchomenos in Arcadia a hundred and twenty, and from the rest of Arcadia a thousand, - of the Arcadians so many; from Corinth four hundred, from Phlius two hundred, and of the men of Mykene eighty; these were they who came from the Peloponnese; and from the Beotians seven hundred of the Thespians, and of the Thebans four hundred.

In addition to these the Locrians of Opus had been summoned to come in their full force, and of the Phokians a thousand.

Before the final battle

The allies then who were dismissed departed and went away, obeying the word of Leonidas, and only the Thespians and the Thebans remained behind with the Lacedemonians.

Herodotus 7.222

The “inscriptions” in Herodotus

- Here once, facing in fight three hundred myriads of foemen, thousands four did contend, men of the Peloponnese
- Go tell the Spartans, thou who passest by, That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.

Where are the missing men?

- Total men given in the epigram - 4000
- Spartans – 300 (299 or 298 of whom die)
- Thespians – 700
- Thebans – 400 (but if Herodotus is correct they go over to the Medes)
- Others present:
 - Helots

Serpent Column

- Set up after the battle of Plataea
- Moved to Constantinople in 324 by Constantine I
- Serpent heads intact until the 17th C



The inscription

- They considered also that he differed in manner of life from the discipline established: amongst other things by this, that upon the tripod at Delphi, which the Grecians had dedicated as the best of the spoil of the Medes, he had caused to be inscribed of himself in particular this elegiac verse:

Pausanias, Greek General,
Having the Medes defeated,
To Phoebus in record thereof
This gift hath consecrated.

But the Lacedaemonians then presently defaced that inscription of the tripod and engraved thereon by name all the cities that had joined in the overthrow of the Medes, and dedicated it so.

Thucydides 1.132

Problems of Perception

- How do we understand what happened?
- Does it matter what actually happened?
- Or is how people understand what happened more important?

Sparta in the Persian Wars

- Appeal of the battles of Marathon, Thermopylae and Plataea
- Rome versus the “Barbarian”

Sparta in the Persian Wars

- Use of Spartan troops in campaigns against the Persians
 - L. Verus 161
 - Caracalla 214
 - Julian 363

Sparta in the Persian Wars

- Freedom Festival (Eleutheria) at Plataea
- Athens and Sparta have a ceremonial dispute over which city was to lead the procession
- Debate in the form of declamations by orators from both sides

Question

- How were the dead at Thermopylae remembered?
- 300 words