



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

HERODOTUS: THE HISTORIES
VOL. 7 MARATHON TO THERMOPYLAE
Chapters 25-28

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CHAPTER 25: REMEMBER THE ATHENIANS

Darius tested the ground. He sent **Mardonius** along the coast of Thrace with a fleet and an army, to punish Athens and Eretria and to take as many Greek cities as he could. The fleet was wrecked off Athos, three hundred ships and more than twenty thousand men in Herodotus's figures, and a Thracian tribe caught the army by night and wounded Mardonius. They came home without a battle. Darius then sent heralds to Greece demanding earth and water. Many mainland cities and all the islanders gave it. Athens and Sparta did not. The Athenians threw the heralds into the pit where condemned men went. The Spartans threw theirs into a well, and told them to take earth and water from there to the king.

He spent three years gathering the next force, and a revolt in Egypt delayed it, and he died. The command passed to Datis and Artaphernes, and the order was narrow: enslave Athens and Eretria, and bring the slaves into his sight. They sailed straight across the Aegean, taking islands as they came. At Eretria the city was betrayed by two leading men after a six-day defence, and the temples were burned, in payment for Sardis, and the people were carried off.

THE PLAIN

Hippias, the old tyrant, guided them in to **Marathon**, a plain fit for cavalry, near the city. The Athenians marched out and camped in a sanctuary of Heracles. The Plataeans came, all of them, and no one else. A runner, **Pheidippides**, had gone to Sparta and arrived the day after he left Athens, and the Spartans said they would come, but not before the full moon. Their law held them. He also, on the way, met the god Pan, who asked why the Athenians paid him no attention, friendly as he was. They believed the runner afterward, and founded a cult.

In the Athenian camp the generals were divided. **Miltiades** wanted to fight. Others wanted to wait for Sparta. The polemarch Callimachus had the casting vote. Miltiades told him that if they did not fight, the city would go over to the Mede, and that if they fought before a crack showed, they could win, provided the gods were even-handed. Callimachus voted to fight. The command came round, by the daily rotation, to Miltiades. He waited until his own day.

They charged at a run, a mile in Herodotus's reckoning, the first Greeks he knows of to charge at a run, and the first to face the Median dress without terror. The centre was thin, and the Persian and Saka centre broke it. The wings won, and then closed on the centre, and the fight became a pursuit to the ships. Callimachus was killed, and Cynegirus, a brother of the poet Aeschylus, had his hand cut off by an axe as he held a stern. Seven ships were taken. The rest got away. The Athenians marched back to the city at speed, because the fleet was rounding the cape towards Phalerum, and were there before it. The Persians lay off the beach, and then sailed home. They had Eretria. They did not have Athens.

The dead were counted: six thousand four hundred on the Persian side, by the Athenian claim, and one hundred and ninety-two Athenians. The Spartans arrived after the full moon, too late for the battle, looked at the bodies, praised the work, and went home. The one hundred and ninety-two were buried on the plain. The mound is still the point of the story.

Historian's Note: The run

The charge at Marathon is in Herodotus. The later story, that a runner dropped dead after carrying the news to Athens, is not. Pheidippides ran to Sparta. The modern marathon distance is a modern invention laid over a real battle. The numbers of Persian dead are Athenian numbers. The decision, the delay for the moon, the Plataeans, and the race back to the city are the parts to trust first.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Athens and Sparta answer a demand for earth and water by killing the messengers. Does the outrage of the demand justify the answer?
2. Miltiades waits for his own day of command. Is that strategy, pride, or the constitution working as intended?
3. No Spartan fights at Marathon, and Sparta praises the dead. What kind of ally is that?

CHAPTER 26: XERXES AND THE DREAMS

Darius died as he prepared to march himself, on Egypt and on Athens both. His son **Xerxes** (ZURK-seez) took Egypt first, and then turned, at a council, to Greece. Mardonius, hungry to be governor of a new province, urged the war. Greece was a beautiful country, too good for anyone but the king, and Athens must be punished. Onomacritus, an oracle-collector, recited the prophecies that favoured an invasion and left out the ones that did not. Xerxes was for the war. Then he slept, and was against it, and called the council back, and said he had been wrong. Egypt was enough. To fight Greeks who had done nothing new was to add the restless to the restless.

That night a dream came, a tall and beautiful man, telling him he had no choice. He ignored it. The dream came again, and threatened him. He did what a man does when he wants a dream to be an accident: he sent **Artabanus**, his uncle, who had spoken against the war, to sleep in the royal bed in the royal clothes. The dream came to Artabanus, and was about to burn his eyes out with hot irons for trying to turn aside what must happen. Artabanus woke convinced. The expedition was decided by a vision neither man had wanted to obey.

Historian's Note: A war decided twice

Herodotus gives Xerxes a real argument against his own invasion, and then a supernatural compulsion. You can read the dream as the court telling itself the decision was not a choice. You can read it as Herodotus's belief that great disasters have more than human authors. Either way, he does not let the king be only a villain. He lets him hesitate, which makes the size of the march heavier.

Demaratus, the exiled Spartan king, was already in Susa. He will tell Xerxes, later, that the Spartans fear the law more than his subjects fear him, and will fight however few they are. Xerxes laughs. The laugh is the expedition's other founding moment. A king who has been frightened by a dream cannot hear a smaller fact about discipline.

He spent four years gathering the force, and provisioning the road, and digging. At the Hellespont the first bridges were broken by a storm. He ordered the sea whipped, and a pair of fetters thrown in, and the overseers of the work beheaded. Herodotus reports the whipping and lets you decide how much of it is rage and how much is a message to the army. New bridges were built, warships and triremes as pontoons, cables of flax and papyrus, brushwood, earth, a palisade so the animals would not see the water. At Mount Athos, where Mardonius's fleet had died, he cut a canal through the neck of the peninsula, wide enough for two triremes to pass, because he would not be refused by the same rock. Herodotus thinks the canal was vanity. The ships could have been hauled across. Xerxes wanted the earth to show he had been there.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Xerxes changes his mind, and a dream changes it back. Who, in this scene, actually decides?
2. Artabanus has to wear the king's clothes before the dream will speak to him. What does the story think kingship is?

3. The canal at Athos is called vanity. Is there a kind of power that has to leave a mark even when a cheaper road would do?

CHAPTER 27: THE REVIEW, THE BRIDGES, AND A FATHER'S REQUEST

Xerxes moved from Sardis in the spring. A Lydian named **Pythius**, who had feasted the whole army and offered to contribute his fortune, asked one favour as the column was leaving. He had five sons with the expedition. Let the eldest stay behind to manage the estate. Xerxes answered at length about his own generosity, and then had the son cut in half, and the two halves set on either side of the road, and the army marched out between them. Herodotus does not decorate it. The request was modest. The answer was a demonstration.

At the Hellespont Xerxes reviewed the force from a white stone throne, and wept, and told Artabanus he wept because in a hundred years not one of the men he saw would be alive. Artabanus, who had opposed the war, said life was sadder than that: misfortunes and diseases make a man wish for death even in a short life, and the god, in his jealousy, frightens what is great. Xerxes let him go home. The bridges held. The crossing took seven days and seven nights, under the lash, the baggage animals and the servants over one bridge, the soldiers over the other. A man of the Hellespont, watching, asked Zeus why he had taken the shape of a Persian and the name of Xerxes to empty the world of men, when he could have destroyed Greece without all this.

THE CATALOGUE

At Doriscus in Thrace the army was counted. Herodotus gives the method: ten thousand packed into a pen, a line drawn, the pen filled again and again. He reaches one million seven hundred thousand infantry, eighty thousand cavalry, and then the naval nations, and then the forces picked up in Europe, and a total that later writers have not believed. He lists the dress of each contingent: Persians in trousers and tiaras, with wicker shields; Medes in the same, because it was their fashion first; Assyrians with bronze helmets and clubs knotted with iron; Indians in cotton; Caspians in goatskin; Ethiopians in lion and leopard skins, their spears tipped with gazelle horn; and on through a roll-call of the empire. The fleet he puts at twelve hundred and seven warships. **Artemisia**, ruler of Halicarnassus, his own city, commands five, and he admires her above the men beside her.

Historian's Note: The numbers

The review at Doriscus is a set piece, and the totals are too large for the roads, the water, and the ships. Later Greek writers already scaled them down. What survives the scaling is the political fact: a composite empire, many languages, one command, and a Greek from Halicarnassus who can name the dress of contingents his city would have seen pass. Read the catalogue as a map of the empire, not as a census.

As the army drank rivers dry (he says the Melas failed, and the Lisus), the Greeks who had decided to resist met, made up a quarrel between Athens and Aegina, and sent spies, who were caught, about to be executed, and released by Xerxes so that they could go home and report the size of what was coming. He wanted the fear to arrive first.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Xerxes weeps for the shortness of life and then marches an army between the halves of a man's son. How do the two scenes belong in the same chapter?
2. Why send captured spies home alive?
3. Artemisia commands ships for the invader, and the historian of Halicarnassus admires her. What does that do to a simple story of Greeks against foreigners?

CHAPTER 28: THE PASS, THE THREE HUNDRED, AND THE LAW

The Greeks decided to hold **Thermopylae** (*ther-MOP-ih-lee*), the Hot Gates, where the mountains come down to the sea and the road is narrow, and to hold Artemisium at sea so that the army would not be turned. **Leonidas** came with the advance guard: three hundred Spartans, all of them men who had living sons, and contingents from the Peloponnese, and from Thespieae and Thebes, and the local peoples. The total was a few thousand, not an army that could meet Xerxes in a plain. It was an army that could meet him in a gate.

Xerxes waited four days, expecting them to leave. A horseman sent to look reported that the Spartans were combing their hair. Demaratus told him what the hair meant. These men have come to fight for the pass, and they are adorning themselves for the danger. It is their custom, when they are going to risk their lives, to dress their heads. Xerxes did not believe it. On the fifth day he sent the Medes in, with orders to take the Greeks and bring them into his sight. The Medes fell. He sent the Immortals, the ten thousand, under Hydarnes. They did no better. The Greeks had longer spears, and a wall, and a ground they had chosen, and they pretended flight and turned, more than once, and the Persians died in the turn.

THE PATH

A man of the country, **Ephialtes**, son of Eurydemus, wanting a reward, told Xerxes of the path over the mountain, the Anopaea, by which the position could be turned. Leonidas had posted the Phocians on it. They heard the leaves under Persian feet at dawn, and withdrew to a higher crest, thinking they were the target. The Persians ignored them and came down.

Leonidas sent most of the allies away. He stayed, with the Spartans, the Thespians who refused to leave, and the Thebans whom he kept, Herodotus says, as hostages. He had an oracle that Sparta must lose a king or a city. He may also have judged that a withdrawal would look like flight, and that the men who stayed could cover the rest. At mid-morning they came out from the wall and fought in the wider part of the pass, with nothing left to save but the killing. Leonidas fell. The Spartans recovered his body. Xerxes' brothers fell. When the troops from the path arrived, the Greeks drew back to the hillock at the entrance, all except the Thebans, who went over. They fought with daggers when the spears were gone, and with hands and teeth, and the Persians buried them with missiles, coming on over their own dead.

Xerxes had Leonidas's head cut off and fixed on a stake. Herodotus thinks this a breach of Persian custom, which honours brave enemies, and a sign of how angry the pass had made him. Later the Greeks set inscriptions. One, for the Spartans, he quotes, and it is the sentence the place kept: Stranger, go tell the Spartans that here we lie, obedient to their words.

The fleet at Artemisium had held, just, in three days of weather and fighting, and when the news of the pass arrived it withdrew. The road into central Greece was open. Athens was next.

WHO STAYED

Contingent	What Herodotus says	What the staying cost
Spartans	Three hundred, chosen for having sons	The pass, and a king
Thespians	Refused the order to leave	The city later burned, the men dead here
Thebans	Kept by Leonidas, then surrendered	A disputed reputation
Phocians	Set on the path, and bypassed	The failure that opened the hill

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Demaratus says the Spartans fear the law more than Xerxes' subjects fear him. What kind of fear is he praising?
2. Leonidas sends the allies away and stays. Is that sacrifice, strategy, or a king's reading of an oracle?
3. The epitaph does not mention the Persians. What does it think the dead were obeying, and why might that be the point?