



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

HERODOTUS: THE HISTORIES

VOL. 8 SALAMIS, PLATAEA, AND REFERENCE

Chapters 29-32

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

This is original Mythopouch wording. It is not the ancient Greek text and not the Henry Cary translation (D. Appleton, 1904) used as the narrative source.

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CHAPTER 29: WOODEN WALLS

The oracle at Delphi told the Athenians to fly to the ends of the earth, and then, when they came as suppliants with olive branches, gave them a second answer: a wooden wall would not fall, and divine Salamis would destroy the sons of women, at the sowing or the gathering of the grain. Professional interpreters said the wooden wall was the thorn-hedge of the Acropolis, and that Salamis would be the death of Athenians, because otherwise the god would have said cruel Salamis, not divine. **Themistocles** (*theh-MIS-toh-kleez*), who had already spent a windfall of silver from the mines at Laurium on a fleet of two hundred ships, read it the other way. The wooden wall was the ships. Salamis would destroy the enemy. His reading won. The city was evacuated. The Acropolis was left to the treasurers and the poor who believed the hedge. Xerxes took it, burned the temples, and sent the news to Susa. The hedge had not been the wall.

THE MESSAGE THAT STARTED THE BATTLE

The allied fleet lay at Salamis, quarrelling. The Peloponnesians wanted to fall back to the Isthmus, where a wall was being built. Themistocles wanted to fight in the narrows, where numbers counted for less and the Persian squadrons would foul one another. He was losing the argument. He sent a servant, Sicinnus, tutor of his sons, to the Persian camp with a message: Themistocles, who favours the king, tells you the Greeks are afraid and planning to slip away. Strike now, and you will take them. Cut off their retreat.

Xerxes believed him, because it was what he wanted, and because a Greek traitor was a familiar object. The Egyptian squadron was sent to close the western channel. The Persians moved by night. **Aristides**, an Athenian exile and Themistocles' enemy, crossed from Aegina in the dark, called Themistocles out, and told him the fleet was surrounded. Let us contend from now on, he said, over which of us can do the city more good. The generals still doubted, until a Tenian ship deserted from the Persians and confirmed it. They had to fight.

Xerxes watched from a hill, with a secretary beside him to write down what each captain did. The Greeks backed water at first, and then an Athenian ship rammed, and the line closed. In the narrows the Persian numbers broke their own order. Ships in the rear pressed forward to be seen by the king and drove the ships in front onto Greek rams. **Artemisia**, pursued by an Athenian, rammed a friendly ship, a Calyndian, and sank it. The Athenian captain assumed she was a deserter or a Greek and turned away. Xerxes, watching, assumed she had sunk an enemy, and said his men had become women and his women men. Herodotus, from her city, tells it without rescuing anyone's dignity.

The king lost the day, and did not know yet how completely. He was afraid the Greeks would sail to the Hellespont and break the bridges. Themistocles, for once advising against his own previous cunning, told the council not to pursue that plan. Better the king should leave. If he were trapped he would fight like a starving man, and the fleet could not destroy the army. Sicinnus was sent again, this time to say Themistocles had restrained the Greeks from breaking the bridges, out of friendship. Xerxes began the retreat. Mardonius, who still wanted a province, asked to be left with picked troops. He was.

Historian's Note: Salamis

The battle was fought in 480 BCE, in the strait between the island and the mainland. Themistocles' two messages are in Herodotus, and they are the kind of story Athenians told about their cleverest man. The topography supports the core: a large fleet disadvantaged in narrow water, a king watching, a retreat that followed. Artemisia's ram is the anecdote he cannot resist, from the city he came from.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Themistocles wins the battle with a lie to the enemy and then lies to the enemy again to end it. Is there a point at which the cleverness becomes the danger?
2. Xerxes watches so that captains will fight to be recorded. How does being watched change a battle?
3. The wooden wall is a phrase that can mean a hedge or a fleet. Why do oracles, in this book, so often become arguments rather than answers?

CHAPTER 30: PLATAEA, MYCALE, AND THE SOFT COUNTRIES

Mardonius wintered in Thessaly, and in the spring came south. Athens, evacuated again, was offered a separate peace: her land back, her temples rebuilt, a place as Persia's equal ally. A Macedonian king brought the offer. The Athenian council waited until the Spartan envoys were in the room, and then refused, calling on the common language, the common shrines, and the shared way of sacrifice, which it was not theirs to betray. They asked Sparta, more practically, for an army in Attica. Sparta was busy walling the Isthmus. Sparta marched, at last, after the wall was far along and after Chileus of Tegea warned them that walls do not stop men who have ships.

The armies met near **Plataea**. Herodotus gives the argument over who would hold the left wing, the omens that would not favour an attack, the Persian cavalry choking a spring, and eleven days of waiting. Then Mardonius, tired of his own Greek allies and of the delay, forced a battle. **Pausanias**, the Spartan regent, manoeuvred badly and bravely. The Athenians ended opposite the Thebans, who fought hard for the Persian side. The Spartans and Tegeans took the brunt of the Immortals. Mardonius was killed where the fight was thickest, on a white horse, with a thousand picked men around him. The Persian line broke. The camp was stormed. The vengeance for Thermopylae, as the Greeks understood it, was taken in an afternoon.

On the same day, Herodotus believes, the fleet landed the men who burned the Persian ships at **Mycale** in Ionia, and a rumour of Plataea ran through them before any messenger could have arrived. He likes the coincidence, and he lets it stand. Ionia revolted again, this time with a fleet behind the revolt. In the next year the Athenians and their allies besieged Sestos, on the Hellespont, and took it, and carried the cables of Xerxes' bridges home as trophies. Herodotus ends the war there, not because nothing happened afterward, but because the invasion had failed.

THE LAST ADVICE

He closes on a story from the beginning, as if the book had been a circle he was always going to complete. Artembares, a Persian, proposed to Cyrus that they leave their rough country and take a better one. Cyrus said they might, and that they should prepare to be subjects instead of rulers. Soft countries breed soft men. The same land does not grow a fine harvest and men good for war. The Persians chose the rough ground and the rule. Herodotus approves the choice, and leaves you with it: an empire that has just failed to add Greece to itself, warned by its founder that the wanting was the danger.

Historian's Note: Where the book stops

The Histories end in 479 BCE, with Sestos, not with the later Athenian empire that grew out of the alliance against Persia. He knows that story. He does not tell it. The last anecdote about soft countries is aimed backward at Cyrus and forward at anyone who thinks the winning side has escaped the rule. Plataea and Mycale are dated to 479. The same-day tradition is his, and you may treat it as meaning rather than as a timetable.

THE INVASION, REDUCED TO ITS GATES

Place	Year	What held or failed
Marathon	490	A citizen levy, a plain, no Spartans yet
Thermopylae	480	A pass, until a path
Salamis	480	Narrow water, and a lie that forced the fight
Plataea and Mycale	479	A land defeat, a shore burned, the bridges' cables taken

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Athens refuses a favourable peace in front of the Spartan envoys. How much of the refusal is principle, and how much is audience?
2. Herodotus ends with Cyrus warning that soft countries breed soft men. After nine books of marvels and wealth, do you accept the moral?
3. He stops before Athens becomes an empire in her turn. What would the next chapter have had to admit?

CHAPTER 31: PRONUNCIATION AND WHO IS WHO

Names in this book travelled from Persian and Egyptian into Greek, and from Greek into a Latin-shaped English. The guide below is for reading aloud, not for reconstructing the ancient sound. Stress the syllable in capitals.

NAMES YOU WILL MEET MORE THAN ONCE

Name	Say it	Who they are
Herodotus	heh-ROD-oh-tus	The inquirer, from Halicarnassus
Croesus	KREE-sus	Last Mermnad king of Lydia
Gyges	JY-jeez	Bodyguard who became king
Candaules	kan-DAW-leez	King who had to be believed
Solon	SOH-lon	Athenian lawgiver, counted no living man happy
Cyrus	SY-rus	Founder of the Persian empire in this telling
Astyages	as-TY-uh-jeez	Median king, Cyrus's grandfather
Tomyris	TOM-ih-ris	Queen of the Massagetae
Cambyses	kam-BY-seez	Son of Cyrus, conqueror of Egypt
Darius	duh-RY-us	One of the seven, then king
Xerxes	ZURK-seez	Son of Darius, led the great invasion
Leonidas	lee-ON-ih-das	Spartan king at Thermopylae
Themistocles	theh-MIS-toh-kleez	Athenian who read the wooden wall as ships
Artemisia	ar-teh-MIZ-ee-uh	Queen of Halicarnassus, fought for Xerxes
Thermopylae	ther-MOP-ih-lee	The Hot Gates, the pass
Halicarnassus	hal-ih-kar-NASS-us	Herodotus's city, in Caria

A FEW WORDS HE RELIES ON

TERMS

Word	In this book
Inquiry, historiē	Not a chronicle: a search, with sources named when he has them
Barbarian	His word for non-Greek. A description of speech, later an insult
Earth and water	The signs of giving the king your land
Tyrant	A sole ruler of a Greek city, not always a monster in his usage
Oracle	A shrine that answers, often in verse, often too late or too wide
Immortals	The Persian ten thousand, replaced when a man fell, so the number did not die

Word	In this book
Satrapy	A province of the empire, with a tribute

The nine books were later named for the Muses: Clio, Euterpe, Thalia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polymnia, Urania, Calliope. Herodotus did not give them those names. The division into nine is old. The Muses are a librarian's poetry.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which name in the table had you been saying differently, and does the sound change the person?
2. Why keep his word barbarian in the notes, if the retelling mostly refuses it?

CHAPTER 32: HOW TO READ HIM, AND WHAT TO ASK

Herodotus says he is obliged to report what is said, and not obliged to believe it. That is the rule of the book, and the rule for using the book. He travelled. He asked priests, heralds, exiles, and the children of the people who had fought. He also arranged. Speeches in the Histories are not transcripts. Oracles arrive on time. Wonders get more sentences than tax lists, except when the tax list is the wonder. Use this chapter as a way back through the others.

THEMES WORTH A SECOND PASS

QUESTIONS THE INQUIRY KEEPS ASKING

Theme	Where it shows	The pressure
Prosperity is unstable	Solon, Croesus, Polycrates hinted, Xerxes weeping	The end has not happened yet
Oracles are true and trap you	Gyges' fifth generation, the great empire, the wooden wall	You still have to interpret
Custom is king	Egypt reversed, Scythian deaths for foreign rites, Persian truth-telling	He reports difference and sometimes ranks it
Freedom and discipline	Athens after the tyrants, Sparta at the pass, Ionians at Lade	Not the same thing
Women who decide	Candaules' queen, Tomyris, Gorgo, Artemisia, Phaedyia	The credit usually travels elsewhere
The edge of the map	Ants, griffins, the Nile, the feathers that are snow	Report, then decide whether to believe

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY THEME

On war. The Persian account says the Greeks were fools to fight over a seized woman, and then Darius and Xerxes cross the sea over a burned temple and a dinner-time insult. Is the Histories a book against revenge, or a book that thinks some injuries have to be answered?

On truth. Pick one story he marks as hearsay and one he marks as having seen. What does the prose do differently? If you cannot tell, what does that say about his skill?

On power. Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes are four answers to the question Darius argued at the council of seven. Which reign does the book finally trust, if any?

On us and them. He calls non-Greeks barbarians and then gives Tomyris, Amasis, and the Egyptian priests more sense than several Greek tyrants. Can a writer escape a category he still uses?

On the last page. Soft countries breed soft men, Cyrus says, and the Persians choose hardship. The Greeks who have just won are about to build an empire of their own, which this book refuses to narrate. Finish the sentence he left open.

A note on this retelling

This is original Mythopouch wording for readers aged 15 and up. It is not the ancient Greek, and it is not the 1904 Henry Cary translation used as the narrative source. Seizures, executions, and the humiliation of the dead are told because they are what the inquiry records, not as spectacle. Where modern scholarship commonly parts from him (the size of Xerxes' army, the meeting of Solon and Croesus, the madness of Cambyses) the notes say so.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which chapter felt most like a wonder, and which most like an inquiry? Were they ever the same chapter?
2. If you could ask Herodotus one question and require him to say whether he believed the answer, what would you ask?
3. The first sentence promises that great deeds will not be rubbed out by time. After Plataea, whose deeds has he actually saved?