

From Histories: On Sparta ca. 450-420 B.C.E.

Herodotus, the pioneer of historical composition, embarked on the creation of the Histories, also known as The Persian Wars, with the aim of unraveling the complex conflict between the Greeks and the Persians, a pivotal event in ancient history.

In seeking the origins and explanation of the Persian War, he interviewed eyewitnesses and journeyed to places as far as Egypt and the Middle East. For Herodotus, the conflict was between slavery and -freedom, although the Persians would have understood the conflict in very different terms. The following passages describe the military capacities of the Greek city-state of Sparta, which dared to challenge the might of the Persians, led by King Xerxes, with 300 soldiers, at the battle of Thermopylae.

"So, tell me, will the Hellenes [Greeks] stand their ground and use force to resist me? For I think that even if all the Hellenes were assembled together, and even if they joined the peoples who dwell west of them, they still could not match me in battle, and therefore, they will not stand their ground when I attack them - unless that is, they should unite. However, I would like to hear your opinion; do tell me anything you can say about them." That was what Xerxes asked, and Demaratos ¹⁴ replied, "Sire, shall I tell you the truth, or shall I say what will please you?" Xerxes ordered him to tell the truth, saying that by doing so, Demaratos would please him just as much as he had before.

Upon hearing this, Demaratos said, "Sire, since you insist that I speak the truth and say nothing for which you could later accuse me of falsehood, here it is in Hellas [Greece], poverty is always and forever a native resident, while excellence is something acquired through intelligence and the force of strict law. It is through the exercise of this excellence that Hellas wards off both poverty and despotism. Now, while I commend all the Hellenes who live in the Dorian lands, ¹⁵ what I shall next tell you applies not to all of them but only to the Lacedaemonians. ¹⁶ First of all, there is no way that they will accept your stated intention to enslave Hellas; next, even if all the other Hellenes come to see things your way, the Spartans will certainly oppose you in battle. And you need not ask as to their number in order to consider how they could possibly do this, for if there are 1,000 of them marching out, they will fight you, and if they number more or less than that - it makes no difference - they will fight you all the same."

Upon hearing this, Xerxes, filled with disbelief, retorted, "Demaratos, how can you make such a claim - that 1,000 men will stand against my troops!". To that, Demaratos replied, "Sire, from the beginning of this conversation, I knew that if I told you the truth, you would not like it. But since you compelled me to speak the absolute truth, I have told you how things stand with the Spartans The Lacedaemonians are, in fact, no worse than any other men when they fight individually, but when they unite and fight together, they are the best warriors of all. For though they are free, they are not free in all respects, for they are actually ruled by a lord and master: the law is their master, and it is the law that they inwardly fear -much more so than your men fear you. They do whatever it commands, which is always the same: it forbids them to flee from battle, and no matter how many men they are fighting, it orders them to remain in their rank and either prevail or perish. Now if I appear to you to be talking nonsense when I say this, I am quite willing to hold my tongue from now on; I said all this because you compelled me to do so.

Nevertheless, sire, I hope that everything turns out in accord with your wishes." ...

As they deliberated, Xerxes sent a mounted scout to see how many of them there were and what they were doing. While still in Thessaly, the King had heard that a small army was gathered here and that its leaders were the Lacedaemonians and Leonidas, ¹⁷ who traced his lineage to Herakles.¹⁸ When the

scout rode up to the camp, he looked around and watched but could not see the whole army since some men were posted within the wall that they had rebuilt and were now guarding it so that it was impossible for the spy to see them. But he did see those outsiders, whose arms were lying in front of the wall, and it just so happened that, at the moment, the Lacedaemonians were the ones posted outside. The scout saw some of these men exercising and others combing their hair, which astonished him. After he had ascertained their number and every other detail, he rode back undisturbed, for no one pursued him; in fact, he was practically ignored. When he returned, he reported all that he had seen to Xerxes.

Xerxes listened but could not understand that the Lacedaemonians were really preparing to kill or be killed; to fight as much as was in their power seemed to him to be the height of folly, the action of fools. So, he sent for Demaratos, son of Ariston, who was in the camp. When Demaratos arrived, Xerxes questioned him about everything he had been told, trying to understand the meaning behind what the Lacedaemonians were doing. Demaratos answered, "You heard what I said about these men before when we were just setting off against Hellas, and you made me a laughingstock when you heard my view of how these matters would turn out.

But it is my greatest goal to tell the truth in your presence, so hear me now once again. These men have come to fight us for control of the road, and that is really what they are preparing to do, for it is their tradition that they groom their hair whenever they are about to put their lives in danger. Now know this: if you subjugate these men and those who have remained behind in Sparta, there is no other race of human beings that will be left to raise their hands against you. For you are now attacking the most noble kingdom of all the Hellenes and the best of men." What Demaratos said seemed quite incredible to Xerxes, and he asked for the second time how they could possibly intend to fight his whole army since there were so few of them. Demaratos replied, "Sire if things do not turn out just as I claim they will treat me like a liar." But even by saying this, he did not convince Xerxes...

When on the fifth day, [the Hellenes] had still not gone away but were instead holding their positions in what seemed to [Xerxes] a display of reckless impudence, he lost his temper and ordered the Medes and the Kissians¹⁹ out against them, with instructions to bring them back alive and to conduct them into his presence. The Medes charged headlong into the Hellenes, and great numbers of them fell. Although others rushed forth to replace them, they could not even drive the Hellenes away, though they, too, suffered great losses in the attempt. Indeed, the Hellenes made it clear to everyone, and especially to the King himself, that although there were many in his army, there were few real men. The fighting went on all day.

Since the Medes were suffering extremely rough treatment, they now withdrew, and the Persians, under the command of Hydarnes, whom the King called the Immortals, came forth to take their place. There was every expectation that they, at least, would easily prevail, but when they joined battle with the Hellenes, they fared no better than the Medes, and indeed, they suffered the very same setbacks. The fighting continued to take place in a confined space, with the Persians using shorter spears than those of the Hellenes and unable to derive any advantage from their superior numbers. The Lacedaemonians fought remarkably well, proving that they were experts in battle who were fighting among men who were not, especially whenever they would turn their backs and feign flight altogether, and the barbarians, seeing this, would pursue them with much clatter and shouting; the Lacedaemonians would allow the barbarians to catch up with them and then suddenly turn around to face them, at which point they would slay countless numbers of them. Of the Spartans themselves, however, only a few fell there. Finally, the Persians retreated since, despite all their efforts to attack by regiments or by any other means, they could not gain any ground in the past...

[A Greek traitor informed Xerxes of a path by which the Persians could flank the Greeks' position. Rather than retreating, the Spartans, supported by a group of Thespians (citizens from the Greek city-state of Thespieae), chose to fight to the death.] Many of the barbarians fell, for the leaders of the regiments were behind them with whips, flogging each and every man and urging them ever forward. Many fell into the sea and died, but even more were trampled alive by one another. There was no counting the number of the dead. The Hellenes knew they were about to face death at the hands of the men who had come around the mountain, and so they exerted their utmost strength against the barbarians with reckless desperation and no regard for their own lives.

By this time, most of their spears had broken, so they were slaying the Persians with their swords. And it was during this struggle that Leonidas fell, the man who had proved himself the most valiant of all. With him, those other famous Spartans whose names I have learned because I think they also proved themselves to be worthy men; indeed, I have learned the names of all 300 of them.

Though the Lacedaemonians and the Thespians alike proved themselves to be brave in this battle, it is said that the Spartan Dienekes proved himself to be the most valiant man of all. It is reported that before the Hellenes engaged the Medes in battle, one of the Trachinians²⁰ said that there were so many barbarians that whenever they shot their arrows, the sun was blocked by their number. Dienekes was not alarmed to hear this but rather, in total disregard for the vast numbers of Medes, said that what his Trachinian friend had reported was, in fact, good news since it meant that while the Medes were blocking the sun, they would fight them in the shade. This saying and others like it have been left as memorials of Dienekes the Lacedaemonian.

After Dienekes, the most outstanding men in this battle are said to be two Lacedaemonian brothers, Alpheos and Maron, sons of Orsiphantos. Of the Thespians, the man who earned the highest distinction was named Dithyrambos, son of Harmatides.

They were buried just where they had fallen, and for these men as well as for those who had met their end before Leonidas could send them away, an inscription was erected which says: Three million foes were once fought right here By four thousand men from the Peloponnese.

That inscription applied to them all, but the Spartans have one of their own: Tell this, passerby, to the Lacedaemonians: It is here that we lie, their commands we obey.

READING QUESTIONS

1. How are the Spartans described? What makes them such good warriors?
2. How is Xerxes portrayed by Herodotus? Does he seem like a good ruler? Why or why not?

14 Demaratos: A Spartan king living in exile in Persia.

15 Dorian lands: Lands inhabited by Greeks, including the Spartans, who spoke the Doric dialect.

16 Lacedaemonians: Spartans.

17 Leonidas: One of the two kings of Sparta.

18 Herakles: Greek mythological hero famous for his strength.

19 The Medes and the Kissians: These were people who lived near the Persians. The Persians, Medes, and Kissians shared a common culture.