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355.48(38:355)“-0480”
COBISS.SR-ID 228051724

Original research article
Received: May 8th 2016
Accepted: June 20th 2016

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THERMOPYLAE REVISITED

ABSTRACT

The battle which defined our understanding of the Greco-Persian wars and classical warfare has numerous hidden or obscure issues, which escape standard scholarship and may be enlightened by careful observation, reading and deduction. Who really were Leonidas' 300? The Phocian wall is usually thought to cut the passage of Thermopylae. However, this would have cut the best commercial road. Most probably it was nearby, an open circuit stemming from the rock, not cutting off the traffic but allowing control and perhaps interdiction by missiles.

The Persians, after being victorious, never passed through the pass but chose another route making the reason of the battle obscure; it was more a show of prowess than a real operational need. The Greek tactics mentioned by Herodotus imply both a universal drill in hoplite armies of passing units through each other's lines and also a Spartan darting tactic, more or less similar to Ekdromi attested later by Xenophon (Hellenika Book IV.5), although executed in inversed spatial terms. Last, but not least, Herodotus' day politics most probably do not allow neither the Spartans to speak of the night raiding in the Persian camp, mentioned by Diodorus, nor himself to state that the true reason of the Phocian contingent failure to keep their position was that once caught unawares they preferred to cover the passage to Phocis, their homeland, than the rear of Leonidas.

KEYWORDS: THERMOPYLAE, LEONIDAS, SPARTA, ANCIENT GREEK TACTICS, SPECIAL OPERATIONS.

INTRODUCTION

Thermopylae is the battle of redefinition of the Greek-Persian military balance, as its outcome defined the subsequent Persian moves. The Greek hoplite infantry was pitted for the first time successfully against a royal Persian army-or even

line infantry. Up to that point, the 2 only Greek land victories, had been the result of surprise. The first was an ambush near Pedasa at c 496 BC by the Carian rebel forces of the Ionian Revolution; there, a Persian army was annihilated at a night action (Her V.121). The second was in an unorthodox, though open combat: a more or less

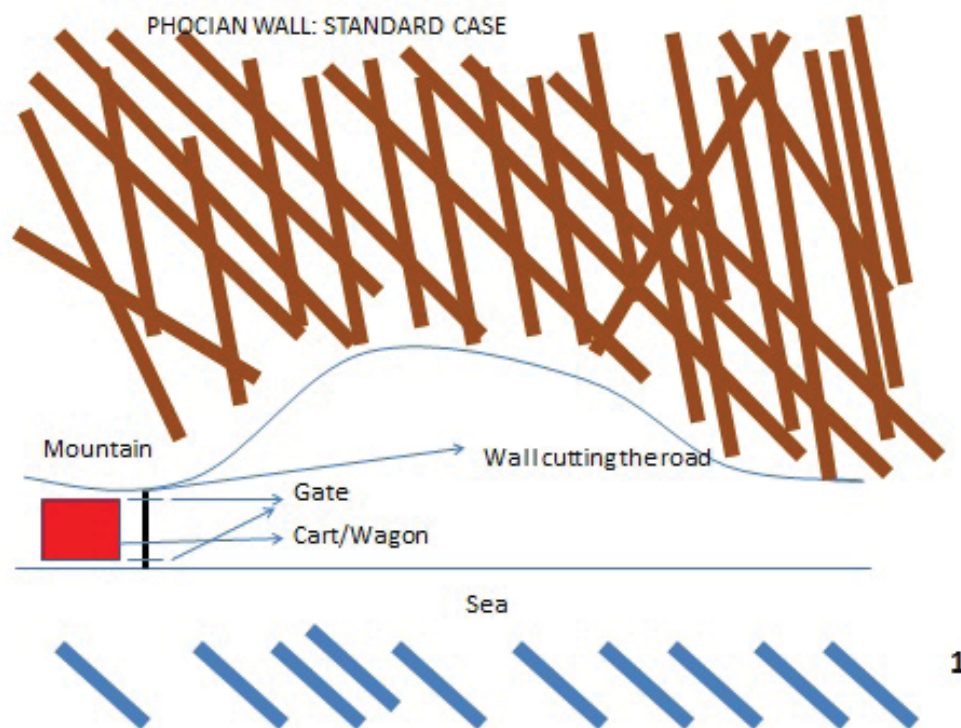


Fig. 1 The wall of the Phocians- standard view. The Diateichismos cuts the traffic. At the narrowest, only one cartwagon can be accommodated, thus the gate must be that wide at least, to allow peacetime traffic, travel and commerce, leaving little room for actual wall. In less narrow positions, the whole idea becomes nullified.

sudden (maybe not surprise) attack, and the tactical novelty of a storming charge combined with differential pressure to isolate and then encircle/flank Persian line infantry. This victory, scored at Marathon, in 490 BC (Her VI.112-115) was most decisive but also indicative of tactical flair from the more robust mainlanders, where the Persian threat had been expected for the last 30 years and basic measures taken in the form of athletic training and tactical dispositions. In a pitched format, without imaginative tactics and surprise, a draw was the best result, scored at Malene, 493 BC, till the Persian cavalry tipped the scales (Her VI.29).

MAIN UNSETTLED ISSUES:

1) Opposing armies

A crushing show of force, combined with the ambition to conquer Europe (Her VII.8,3), implies

a vast royal army, definitely twice or thrice the size of the Greeks united. The numbers of the latter must not be dismissed with only three score city-states rallying to defend the motherland, in Plataea, in 479 BC more than 30.000 hoplites were present, and a total of 100.000 battle-ready troops (Her IX.30). Medising Greeks were not to be excluded, as potential enemies, since Greeks had a name for untrustworthiness towards the Persian throne (Athenians 510 BC, Ionians 500 BC etc).

This royal army moves in mainland routes- one or more- leaving the coastal areas to the amphibious component of the royal fleet. From Therme it advances through the mountains, circumventing the first Greek defense in Tempe, then follows the easy coastal road from Thessaly to Malis (Her VII.196-201).

The Greek contingent comprised two elements: the local and neighboring communities sending their entire forces -more or less- and the expeditionary forces sent as reinforcements for

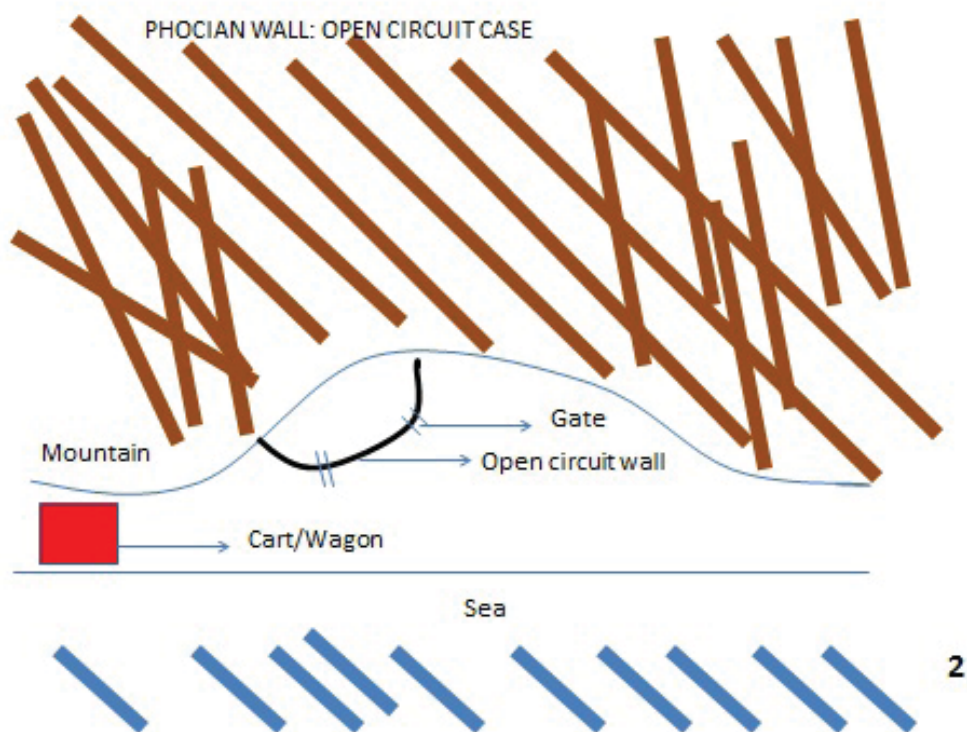


Fig. 2 The wall of the Phocians: open circuit. The wall stems from the sheer rock, allows control of the road by missiles from its top and sallies from the gates. Peacetime traffic is unhindered.

the projection of advanced defense by distant southern Greek states. The latter were more or less token forces, according to politics. A strong commitment implied tactical levies, a half-hearted one was obvious by sending small, standing units (brotherhoods-in-arms) of the respective poleis, similar to the 300 Spartan Hippeis. Thus, instead of some thousands, the medizing Thebans dispatched 400 (Her VII.202), possibly a special unit ancestral to the Sacred Band (Plut Pelopidas XVIII.1). This is very likely as their commanding officer is the father of the commander of another 400-strong Theban unit which, in 431BC, infiltrated in pure Special Operations mission to occupy Plataea (Her VII.233).

The stout Thespians, of the very few Boeotians not to medize, sent 700 troops (Her VII.202), which might have been their entire hoplite army (perhaps at 2/3, expeditionary strength). Still, in later action, in Plataea, 479 BC the city is mentioned as having no hoplites due to their annihilation at Thermopylae (Her IX.30), so 700 must

have been the entire hoplite levy.¹ The Phocians sent an expeditionary force of 1000 Hoplites, the Locrians their whole army (Her VII.203), which was a meager 1000 hoplites (Diod XI.4, 7).

The Spartans were in the middle. Herodotus mentions only the 300 crack Spartan troops (Her VII.202). These are easily identified as the Hippeis/Knights (Thuc V.72,4), drafted in a yearly basis by three appointed officers, the Hippagretae, also of yearly commission (Xen Lak Polit IV.3), each Hippagretas drafting 100 adolescents, obviously from each of the 3 Dorian tribes. But Herodotus also mentions Lakedaimonians when narrating the battle (i.e. Her VII.208, 211), a far wider term historically encompassing Spartans and Periekoï. He also makes clear that the Spartans, not, stayed to die with the King (Her VII.220); so the survivors of the rest of the Lakedaimonians were

¹ Herodotus in IX.30 counts them as combat troops, not logistics personnel and explicitly states they had no hopla, thus making obvious the origin of the word Hoplite, contrary to the beliefs of many modern scholars as Lazanby- and Whitehead, 1996.

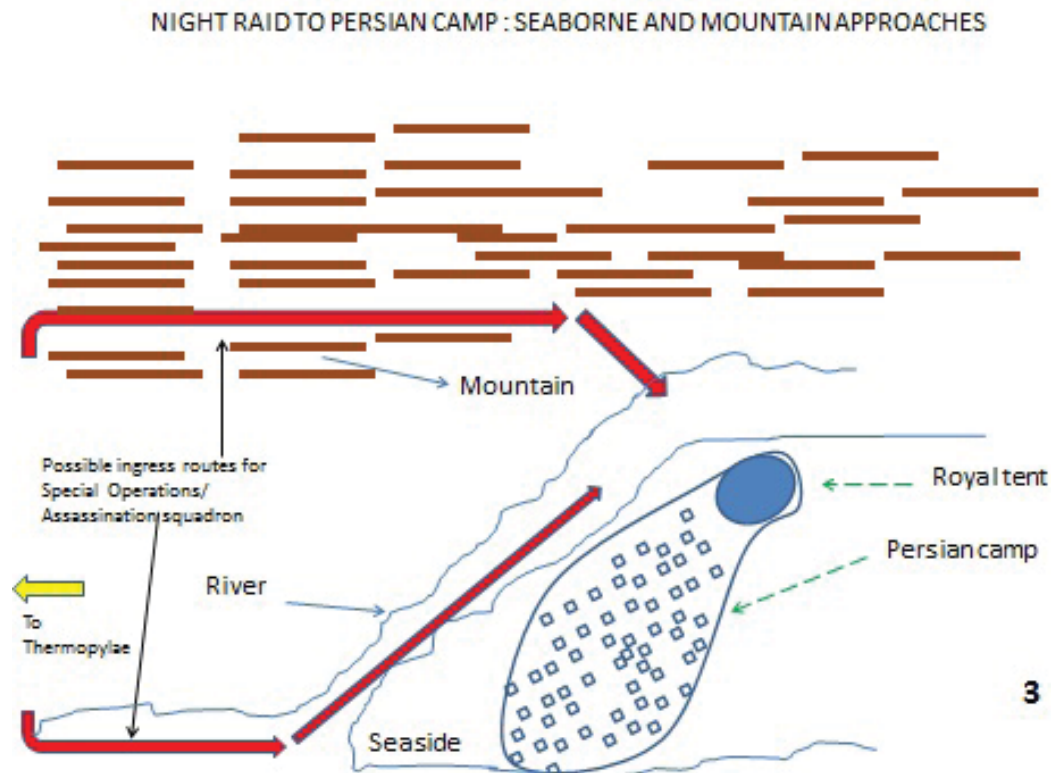


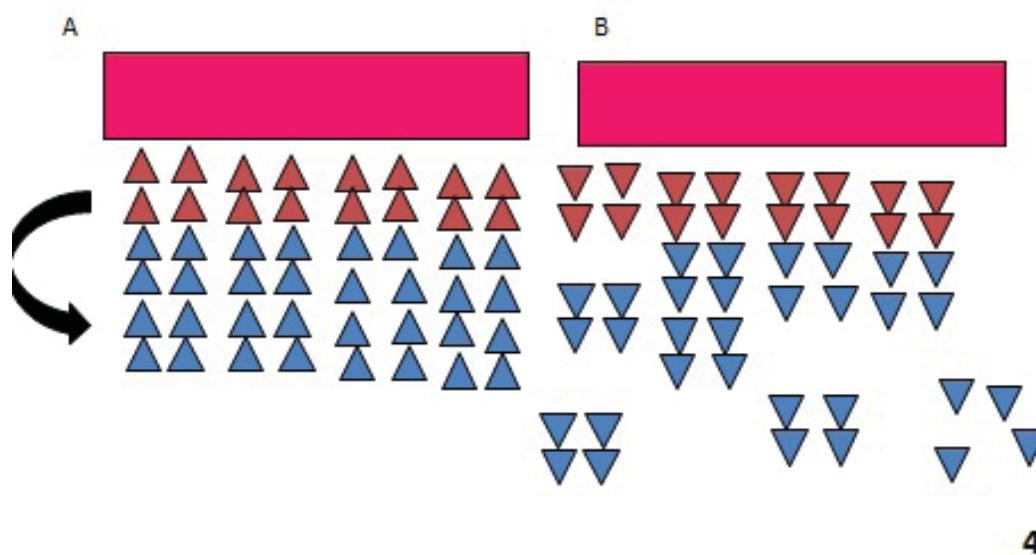
Fig. 3 The routes for a Special Operations squadron sent to assassinate Xerxes. The sea-river route is longer and takes the party in front of the whole camp. The mountain route allows better cover and access near the Royal Tent.

sent back, probably as the only Laconian troopers with live experience of the Persian war making. Diodorus directly enumerates a thousand Lakedaimonians and 300 Spartans (Diod XI.4, 5), but the Greek is unclear and may be translated as both “and” or “including”. The latter is preferable; a bit previously (Diod XI.4, 2) the full strength of the force, has been set to 1000, as correctly noticed by Flower, 1998. Should 1000 be the total, the 700 missing in Herodotus’ account might have been another Laconian unit mobilized and deployed, most probably not comprised (entirely) of Peers. This leads to a division-size (Mora) unit of 1000, standard in most of Greece. A Mora situated or stationed north of Sparta, mobilized at short notice and manned to 2/3, the standard expeditionary strength as Thucydides says of the Peloponnesian armies invading Attica (II.10,2) fills the bill. This 1000-man total strength is much more than for Morae in the age of Xenophon and as described by him (Xen Hell IV.5), but consis-

tent with Greek practice and Spartan population abundance before the catastrophic earthquake of 464 BC. As Plutarch points out, the strength of Morae is mentioned as anything between 600 and 1000 men (Pelopidas, XVII) and such differences might stem from different manning /mobilization levels or different ceilings in different times/generations. A 1000-strong territorial division is perfectly compatible with the Spartan army of the period. This line of thought can be expanded to identify this Mora as the Skiritae, renowned to later military authors for their prowess in security, irregular warfare, and reconnaissance (Xen Lac Pol XII.3 & XIII.6). If such practice can be retro-projected, Skiritae, who are Lakedaimonians but not Spartans, nimble and good on mountain warfare were an excellent choice both for the terrain in Thermopylae and for the Special Operations undertaken (see below).

On the other hand for such a forced march and in view of the terrain and the nature of the fight-

I. FEIGNED FLIGHT-1



I. FEIGNED FLIGHT-2

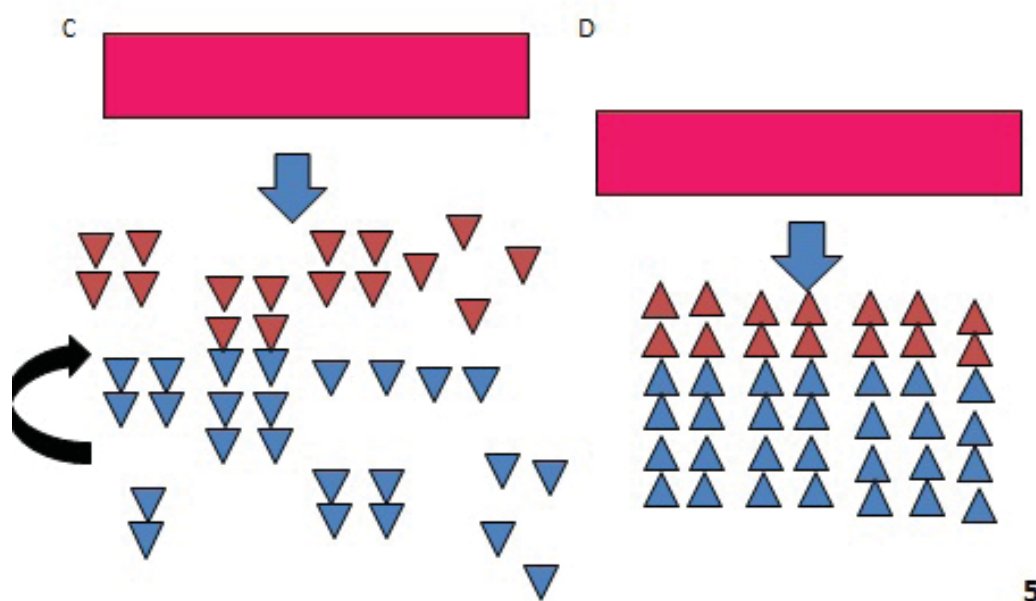


Fig. 4-5 Feigned flight, standard execution.

All phalanx troops turn on their heels where they stand (A) and flee in full face and proximity of the enemy (B) with the rear ranks –usually veterans–slowing down the front ones, usually faster and younger in age. Even if they make good their escape, they have the enemy at their heels (C) and about-facing, regrouping and dressing the line (D) almost simultaneously, to shove the enemy off is extremely difficult

ing, Leonidas might have taken with him a unit of 1,000 young troops from the whole realm. These troops may be the ones sent as advance-guard to Megara in 479 BC while the rest of the Spartan-and Allied- Army were stationed in Isthmus (Her IX.14), and the ones executing the bait-retreat plan in the battle of Platea (Her IX.57, IX.85). They should have been the youngest, and Plutarch (Apoph. 225e) mentions unmarried youngsters sent home by Leonidas as couriers to the Ephors. Although for this campaign Leonidas had enrolled fathers of male kids to ensure the survival of the bloodlines (Her VII.205), Spartans married young and were encouraged, if not pushed, to sire just as young (Xenophon Lac Pol I.6) but exceptions would always present, especially in a territorial division and/or a young age-class.

Practically, the usual Greek expeditionary drafting practice seems to fall under three possible mobilization quota:

1. The dispatch of the standing armies, elite groups of different stock and origin in each city-state, usually called “Logades” by Herodotus (IX.21), to indicate they were under oath. Such groups were of standard strength for each city-state, but standardization did not occur among different states. This corresponds well with the renowned “Sacred Band” of Thebes (Plut Pelopidas XVIII.1) through the expanded similar corps of late 5th-early 4th centuries (“Logades” of Argos in Thuc V.67,2; “Epilektoi” (Elites of Phliousin Xen Hellenica VII.2,10; “Epilektoi” of Arcadia Diod XV.67,2 & XV.62,2); it also links with the past, as the Trojan War was possible due to the suitors’ oath before Helen’s choice of Menelaus.

2. The mobilization of their whole levy (Pandemei) for short duration and, preferably, with the opponent nearby (Her VII. 206, Diod XI. 4, 4). Thespieae clearly implemented this quatum, as did other states as the Locrians (Her VII. 203).

3. The draft of the majority of the full levy, by age criteria (Her IX. 12). This most probably was following a 2/3 ratio for the expeditionary force (Thuc II.10, 2). Multiple expeditions were

not very common at the era, and thus we cannot deduce if the sum of the expeditionary forces was following the 2/3 rule or other arrangements were made, as in imperial Athens (Thuc I.105, 3-4) and 4th century Sparta (Xen Hellenica VI.4).

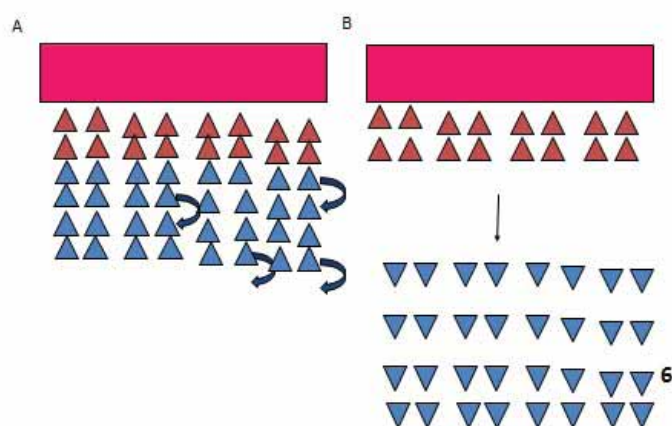
Herodotus never mentions the 2/3 rule -but he also fails to mention that the 300 Spartans are Knights/Hippeis; arguably, this rule seems valid: the Spartan Peers are 8000 according to Demaratos (Her VII. 234) and at Plataea the expeditionary force has a core of 5.000 Peers (Her VIII. 10), a 0.62 compared to the 0.66 which equals the 2/3.

It is possible that the implementation of case 1 instead of 3 by the Spartan state was causing consternation to allies and allowed to Thebes to reciprocate by sending 400 men. Spartans served from 20 to 60 years of age, and the ones from 20 to 30 were permanently on alert, sleeping in barracks (Plut Lycurgus XV. 4 & XXV. 1). Their number adjusted for the total levy is 2000, coincidentally the number of the expedited reinforcements to Marathon in 490 BC (Her VI.120). By comparison, the Athenian naval contingent in Artemisium was 120 triremes (Her VIII.1) with no less than 170 sailors, oarsmen and marines for a total of almost 20000, a 2/3 rate at the very least.

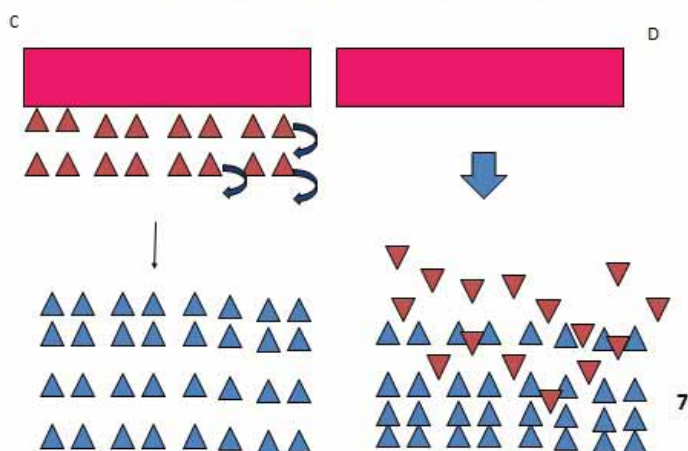
II) Battlefield-fortifications

The straight of Thermopylae is one of a system of 3 straights leading from Malis to southern Greece proper. The position taken by Leonidas cuts the coastal road along the Euboan Gulf, a route ill suited for a massive army as far as provisions are concerned, but rather smooth. After a distance and deep in Epiknemidian Lokrian territory, the road branched to the coastal way proper and to a SE-direction, the main route into Boeotia through Elateia, and, along the Kephissus river, to Thebes. It was a logical choice. Moreover, it was useful for combined army-navy operations, and if followed throughout its length by coast (the Persians used parallel routes of advance) allowed

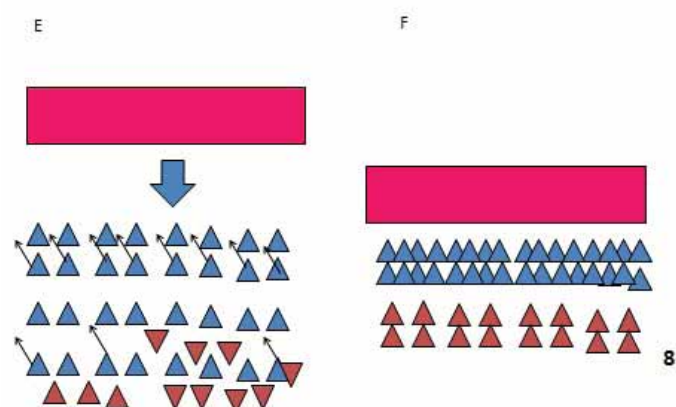
II. REVERSE EKDRIMI-1



II. REVERSE EKDRIMI-2



II. REVERSE EKDRIMI-3



6-7-8. Feigned flight, executed as Reverse Ekdromi.

Slower, veteran troops of the rear ranks turn in their heels (A) and retire (B) as fast as possible unnoticed by the enemy as the front ranks, with the youngest and fleetest troops stand fast and obstruct the view. Having thus gained a distance, the veterans turn and reform while the front ranks suddenly break and run at full speed, unhindered by rear ranks (C). After a moment's startle, the enemy follow hot at their heels, without making visual contact with the regrouped veterans. The fleeing youngsters retire among the veterans' files (D). With the breathless youngsters to their rear, the veterans close ranks (E) to face the pursuing, disorganized enemy with dressed line and compact, dense formation. Having caught their breath (F) the younger hoplites regroup and join the files of the veterans to reinforce the phalanx and add momentum to the shove.

to support the fleet from ambushes with missile weapons in a steadily narrowing environment, near the straits of Eurippus, as Xerxes guides would have let him know.

The second approach was the Asopos gorge following the Anopaia pathway and branching to Phocis and back at the coastal road, behind Thermopylae and Leonidas' rear, a very steep road and utterly unsuitable for a large army and its transports (Her VII.216). The third road, starts again from the Asopos gorge near Trachis, but cuts south through Doris and then offers three choices: Phocis to Boeotia (Her VII.199 and VIII.31-33), the way Xerxes did select to move, or west to Delphi, or South to Amphisa in Ozolian Lokris and at the north coast of the Gulf of Corinth. It was at first steep road through ravines, possibly unsuitable for a large army's transports, but leading promptly to friendly and well-provisioned, hospitable Boeotia, after a brief incursion to the heart of Greece-orultimately to the north of the Gulf of Corinth. The same network was used later by the warring factions of Greek civil wars (Xen-Hellenika VI.4; Paus Boeotika XV.2) and by the Romans (Paus Achaika XV.3) in their expeditions between Southern and central Greece.

The area Leonidas occupied was something of a tourist attraction (Her VII.176). It is difficult to envisage the terrain: the narrowest (only one car-wagons wide: Her VII.200), even if as narrow as Herodotus states, is unclear in nature. One side is a steep rock face of the mountain. What is there from the other side? Most probably the sea. This might be non-negotiable for commercial traffic, but assault infantry would have negotiated a detour by plunging up to the chest in the sea to outflank an enemy, as happened some months later in Potidaea (Her VIII.129). No such issue, no similar action has been described. Thus one has to understand that at the time the road is considerably higher than the sea level, so as not to permit flanking, and rather precipitous: troops fallen to the sea are mentioned as fatalities (Her VII.223).

The Phocian fortification repaired, rebuilt,

reconditioned and used (Her VII.176) is usually thought of as a vertical wall sealing off the road, something very like the doors or Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed such works were used by the Greeks to cut off enemy forts and cities situated on promontories and were called *Diateichismoi*. The fortification in Isthmus, progressing in the earnest at the same time (Her. VIII.71 & IX.8-9) and performed both before, by the Mycenaens under Atreus, and after, during Epameinondas' incursions (Diod XV.68,3) had been such cases. But there is absolutely no need to envision it thus, as there would have been very little room for pillars and a door capacious enough to allow a laden chariot to pass (for peaceful times), plus parapets for an adequate defense force. It may very well have been an open circuit, both edges attached on the sheer rock of the mountain, allowing the stationing of a friendly garrison. This garrison may attempt pitched battle cutting off the road in the face of the enemy, then fall back through the gates of the circuit, and continue to gravely harass the enemy by missiles from the wall. Both Xerxes' and ancient Thessalians' cavalry and any transportation using draught animals would have been unable to pass, even if competent infantry might do using skillfully their shields.

Herodotus writes-and presents in ominous times, when Athens and Sparta are already at loggerheads, although not in the deadly entanglement of the Great Peloponnesian War. Phocians are allies to Athens (Thuc I. 107,2), and Thessalians are traitorous enemies (Thuc I. 107,7). Thus he remains very considerate towards the former. The little plateau entrusted to them, more than any way to the rear of Leonidas, offers an inroad to Phocis. By being at that point the Phocian contingent protects both the rear of the defenders of Thermopylae and the approach to the motherland. Once taken by surprise they do not take a last stand position under panic, but form their phalanx at the point which allows interdiction to any move towards Phocis. Only under this light is understandable the absurd notion of the Persian task force

not engaging them and they being steady at their position (Her VII.217): the Phocians do not endanger their primary mission, the defense of their territory by engaging away from their commanding position (the hill they assembled on, after two or more days of inspecting the surroundings, had they to do so. And the Persians, seeing them out of position and defending another branch of the crossroads, simply bypass to their mission as well.

THE UNEASY QUESTIONS

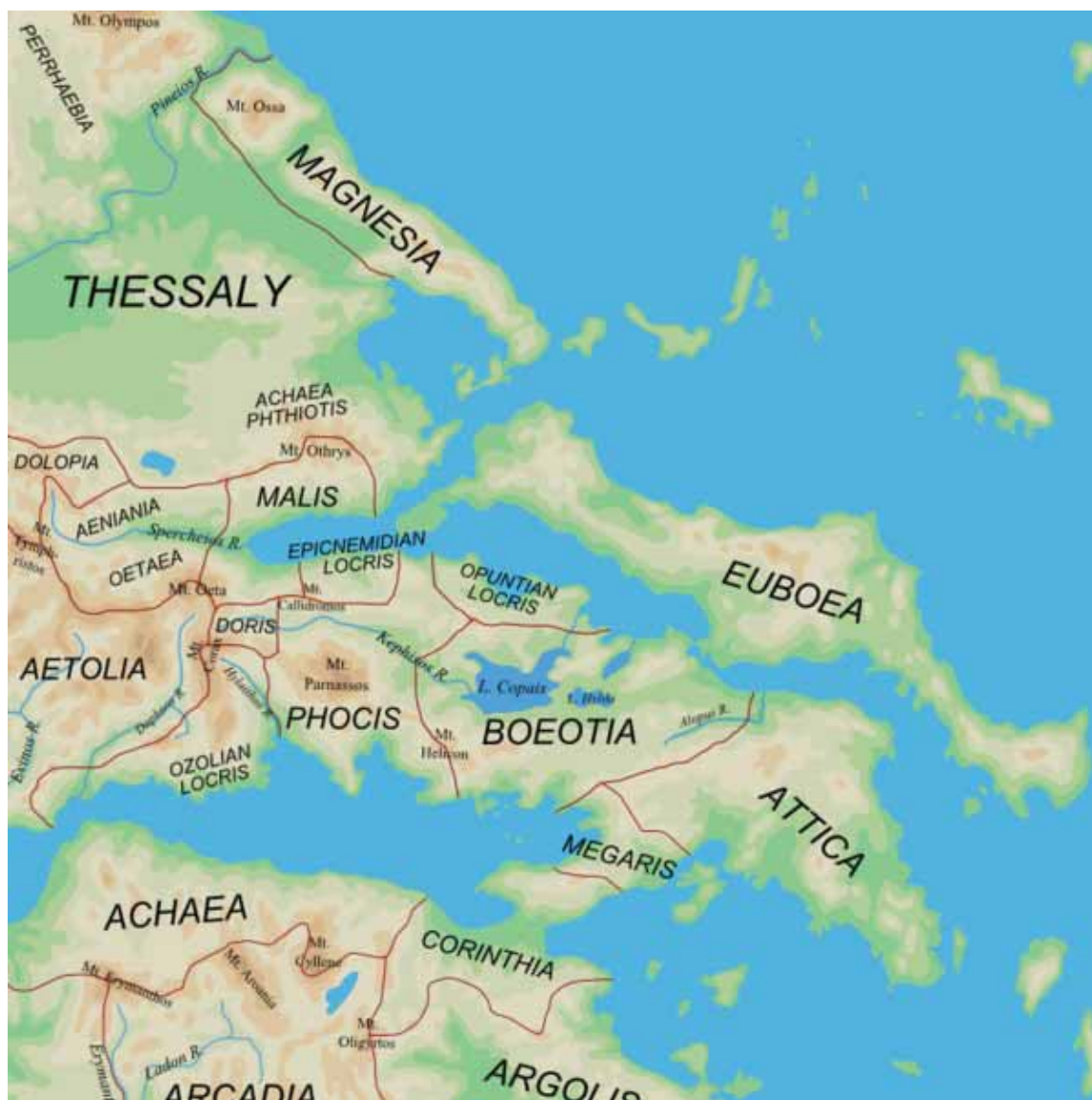
The Persian army emerged from east-north east having skirted the west coast of the Pagasitic gulf southwards, a rather easy landscape, and then turned westwards to skirt the Malaic gulf to the plain and valley of Spercheios. This area is *Hellas* proper (in Homeric geography – Iliad II. 681-5). Since Leonidas had been there first, so as to repair the fortification and establish a center of support operations (Her VII. 176), an incursion to the Malian Plain, in order to deprive the invader of food, shelter and fodder was the most logical thing to do (Green, 1970), and easily doable by an army only marginally short of 10,000 (Her VII. 202-3). The mention of Polyaeus (I.32, 3) of an incursion carried out with extreme efficiency and skill by Leonidas most probably refers to this operation in the eve of the Battle of Thermopylae.

The questions start from the moment Xerxes arrives and encamps. Why waiting for some four days (Her VII. 210) and does not engage at once, to startle opponents up to this point elusive and otherwise unwilling to engage, as demonstrated in the thessalian-macedonian border at Tempe where they promptly retreated before any action had started (Her VII.173)? Moreover, why to engage them and not bypass them through the other straight, to Doris as he eventually did? After all, once the battle was done and he emerged victorious, he never led his army through the conquered pass. He went through the gorges to Doris straight south (Her VIII.31). So, why had he not done it

in the first place and engaged in a stupidly bloody action? Additionally why did he not do it after the first two days, when direct assault seemed a complete failure and a thrust to this direction would have broken the deadlock? It would have been bad for his army's morale, but there was no reason to get despaired-or even frustrated- as Herodotus says (and has been told by the Greeks of his court, or rather their descendants, interviewed by him). Could there be a strong and determined garrison at this point also, which Herodotus knows/says nothing about, and most probably coming from a native population not very friendly to the Athenians in Herodotus' days? May it be the Malians, prominent as 1000 troops in Diodorus (Diod XI.4,7) but missing in Herodotus account (Her VII.203), either for the above reasons or because they were posted far from the Thermopylae position? Both Green, 1970 and Bradford, 1980 support such an eventuality.

OPPOSING MOTIVES-PLANS

The Greek plan should have been a war of attrition. Killing enough opponents would not have been a viable option, but straining the logistics and draining the supplies of a vast army boxed among mountains was another thing altogether. The Troizen-decree (Jameson, 1960- EM 13330, Epigraphical Museum, Athens) reveals that the real intension of the abandonment of Athens, a meticulously preplanned massive operation was to entrap the huge Persian army in Attica and destroy its fleet, thus aggravating a supply problem forecasted months before by Artabanos (Her VII. 49). In this light the campaign at Thermopylae aimed at boxing the Persian Army away from the supplies of the fleet to wear it down, if not to stop it altogether. It was a different plan from the purely interceptive campaign at Tempe, a land campaign where the Greek fleet was a mere means of transportation (Her VII. 173). In Thermopylae



9. Territorial map of the area of operations in Thermopylae by Map_greek_sanctuaries-en.svg: Marsyas, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Regions_Mainland_Greece.png.

it was a predominantly naval campaign², as the expeditionary land force was a mere 4,000 (Her VII. 202 & Diod. XI. 4,5) compared to 10,000 at Tempe (Her VII.173).

The same is true for sapping the morale of the enemy, especially the non-Persian subject troops.

² The Spartan reservations, due to the danger of both operational (by secondary routes and alternate passes) and strategic (by deep sea raids at the rear) flanking dictated the commitment of limited forces, and this agreed with Themistocles' wish, and need to use the navy he created (Her VII.144) as the primary arm against the Persians, committing thus most of the full manpower of Athens (38,000 out of perhaps 40-42,000) against the enemy, instead of the 20-25% which were the Hoplites (10,000).

Some bloody failures and their fragile morale, rooted on idolizing the King of Kings' power, military prowess and diplomatic efficiency (Polyaen VII. 15,1) would be undermined, and the same goes with the authority of the King of Kings figure, an almost divine one.

Still, given enough time the positions may be breached, either by sheer exchange rate of casualties, or by flanking, thus three successive ones were selected: Tempe, Thermopylae and Isthmus. After all, despite at some points being a one-sided carnage, the battle, fought undermost favor-



10. Perhaps the best geophysical map of the Central Greece comes from P. Connolly's "Greece and Rome at War" London: Greenhill.

able terms for the Greeks, had a 5:1 exchange rate, with some 20000 Persian versus 4000-odd Greek fatalities (Her VIII.24-5); such rate was unsustainable for the long haul and far below the 30:1 in Marathon (Her VI.117). But time was of essence. Leonidas' was really a holding force, to be reinforced as required but the main forces kept

to the extreme rear, to guard against insurrections and also flanking, as the bitter lesson in Tempe had shown the Persians capable of. At this stage the main arm was the navy. If the imperial navy could be kept out of reach of the army resupply would be a vital issue. The navy had no unlimited supplies, it was vulnerable to storms and to

surprise attacks in unknown coastlines. Practically, the Greeks had to intercept one of the two branches of the Persian War machine to win. If the Greek fleet kept its own, the Persian could not outflank Thermopylae. If Thermopylae held, the royal army could not threaten Euboea and the mooring base of the Greek fleet. Moreover, the Greek fleet of some 270 vessels (Her VIII.2) could easily embark the whole of Leonidas' army of 7000 (Her VII. 202-3) by adding 25 men in each vessel, and land them near the Persian mooring, thus eliminating the fleet at the beach, before the Persians establish communication between army and navy. This is why Xerxes attacked. He simply did not want the Greeks there. The passage was of little consequence. The comparative positions and forces though made the mix extremely flammable. Waiting for 4 days (Her VII. 210) was not just to muster his lumbering, gigantic army, which took days to concentrate to a position. He was also waiting for his fleet. Not seeing it rang a bell and the assault to eliminate the land element of the Greek resistance was a reflex reaction from the Persian High Command. Still, their instincts were true. With Leonidas gone, the whole defense plan was shattered: the Greek navy withdrew, the Persian navy made contact with the army normalizing supplies and the pass to Doris was free.

TACTICS

The Greek tactics mentioned by Herodotus imply a universal drill in hoplite armies of passing units through each other's lines in order to rotate them in combat (Her VII. 212). This is easily done in exercise and is the logical solution for such problems since the invention of trained infantry. But it establishes that the Hoplite infantry of many Greek states, not only Sparta, had the ability of drilling -and under pressure at that. Not only they were able to execute under pressure, but paired to other similar troops, with whom they had never trained before.

More impressive is the "feigned flight" of the Spartans (Her VII. 211). Contrary to the Herodotus account, it should have been, more or less, similar to *Ekdromi* attested much later by Xenophon (Hellenika Book IV.5), although executed in inversed spatial terms. The engaged line cannot retreat in the face of the enemy-especially of a more numerous and lightly clad enemy- en bloc without suffering casualties. Thus the less fleet portion, the veterans, posted in the rear ranks, retreat first, at a double, unnoticed by the enemy and reform at a distance but promptly. In such cases the original battle order cannot be recreated and one should fight next to any random comrade, something that "only troops drilled under Lycurgus' laws can do" (Xen Lac Polit IX.7). Subsequently, the fleetest troops, who must have remained engaged with the enemy, must brake at once and gain some strides-four to six- while their opponents are startled. After that, since they were not facing missile troops but shock infantry, they must keep and even open the distance and cover their back with the shield for fear of the occasional javelin or stone. Bringing on the enemy hot on their heels, they cannot instantly regroup and turn, even if perfectly trained. It is much more likely to retire through the files of a line formed by the ones who retired first and are unnoticed by the pursuers. After they pass through the spaces between files, the line will be sealed in less than 3 seconds, the running troops regroup and catch a breath behind the last rank of the line and then join the files to reinforce it.

Herodotus has no idea of Special Operations and cannot even imagine them. He is narrow-minded. Speaking of the diver Skyllias, he disapproves of the lore of him swimming a great distance without coming to surface as impossible (Her VIII.8). He never wonders if a very human device, like a combination of straw (as snorkel) and stones (as weights) might make him stay undersea, without being seen, which was the meaning of the lore: nobody counted his breaths. They simply had not been able to spot him on the sur-

face. In such a set of mind, the notion of Skyllias-cutting the anchor ropes of the Persian fleet and thus maximizing the disastrous effect of the storm (Paus Phocika XIX. 2), is unthinkable.

It is no great wonder then that he says nothing on the assassination attempt mentioned by other historians (i.e. Diodorus XI.10). It was very Spartan, and very possible to try such an act; it was also Spartan not to talk about it (Thuc V.68,2), especially at a time when previous friends became mortal enemies and any detailed account for past battles might be used to deduce their current operating procedures and *modus operandi*. Assassinations and Special Operations were an integral part of ancient Greek politics. Trained professionals were available, although not in abundance. Especially the Spartans had a name for such attempts and skills due to Krypteia (Plutarch Lycurgus XXVIII.1), in some cases even involving the kings themselves as operators (Paus Messeniaka IV.3). Flower, 1998 noticed the Krypteia connection but fails to mention that the 300 Knights in this season are older, more experienced and perhaps selected with this chapter of their CV in mind, as well. But the story of Diodorus (XI.10) is not satisfactory. The tent of the king would have been as far as possible from the line of access of the enemy. The two armies were distant enough for the sentries to detect a massive approach, even as clandestine as Diodorus tries to make it (Diod XI.10, 1). The version of the crack unit sent, not led, by Leonidas, is a much better bet-and here Diodorus (in XI.9,2) might have had it right, concerning the number of raiders involved: 500. The lore³ wants it to swim from the Greek position, from someplace with smooth shoreline so as to enter with the necessary gear, walk-swim the distance to the river, then upriver to the tent of the King. Still, although clandestine enough, the distance and time start to become an uneasy factor, and the task force has to move upriver throughout the Persian camp, as the

king's tent is always upriver, to water with clear and pure water.

As it is a clandestine operation and the instigator perished, we may never learn the exact facts, but it is very conceivable that the lore is somewhat distorted. A just as clandestine and faster approach, straight to the tent of the king, would have been by marching the opposite way than that of the flanking force of the Persians (Her VII.215-21). In the dead of night the two groups might have lost each other easily-or rather the Persians the sneaky Greeks, especially if the latter are acknowledged "Special Operators", as Skiritai might have already been (Xen XII.3 & XIII.6; Thuc V. 67,1) or members or Krypteia surely were (Plut Lycurgus XXVIII.1). This version explains very well why Leonidas did not try to intercept the flanking force, although he was informed early enough (Her VII. 219). He did not want to have any noise or commotion in that area, so as to keep the guard of the Persian camp down. The attempt was made and had some Persian officials killed, such as the two brothers of Xerxes (Her VII.224), who cannot be explained as casualties in any other way. Neither the attrition approach nor the assault attempts of the Persian army included risking higher officials, much less princes. The late time of the assault of Xerxes at the pass (Her VII.223) the third day implies that the camp was in an uproar which delayed the usual early dawn onset of hostilities by the Persians. Otherwise he would have attacked as early as possible to pin the Greeks and make retreat impossible, and also to take their attention away from the flanking force. Leonidas advance in the open (Her VII.223), might thus be explained as trying to give a final blow to the Persians, in case the King had been incapacitated, and once that failed, he fell back. But this is hardly believable: in such a case he would have covered his rear with the rest of the army guarding the narrowest part inversed, to pin the flanking force, and he would have thrust his meager force in deep and compact formation to pierce as deep as possible into the Persian camp and lines. But Herodo-

³ P. Green in Xerxes at Salamis 1970; but previously, the movie "The 300 Spartans" of 1962 shows a seaborne night raid.

tus, explicitly states that he had his line extended (Her VII. 223) and sent the rest of the army away (Her VII. 222). The latter might have been desertion. The key factor, though, that weighs against desertion is the deployment to an extended line. This serves one purpose only, to expose as many troops to enemy contact so as to maximize enemy engagement and casualties in shock action. This assassination attempt, along with the carnage and consternation of the two previous days, the loss of his relatives and the old case of murder of the Persian embassy (Her VII.133) allowed, or imposed to Xerxes the ill-treatment to the corps of Leonidas (Her VII.238), considered at the same time sacrilegious, criminal and blasphemous to Gods and Humans.

There is also another issue, little noticed but of paramount importance: the method of command. It is often discussed but rarely, if ever, well understood in technicality and detail and compared to later and modern practice. The Greek way was to lead, and the commander, once the order was set and the missions delegated (if any) took his position in the line to fight. In some cases, as in Marathon and Plataea, a degree of overview and control was secured by the Commander-in-Chief in order to intervene and orchestrate more elaborate actions, and in Thermopylae the exchange of detachments (Her VII. 212) show such a Command and Control function properly exercised by Leonidas.

But what about the Persians? They are often ridiculed for ERECTING, manning and operating a lavish observation platform, at a proper, commanding feature of the landscape, for Xerxes (the Commander-in Chief), with every possible comfort and luxury as mentioned for both Thermopylae and Salamis (Her VII. 212 and VIII. 90 respectively). There are royal scribes, taking notes (Her VIII. 90). Really, one can wonder what difference is there between Xerxes establishment and 19th century observation position for commanders and staff, or even 20th century. Is there a conceptual difference to the Persian establishment and the well provided, guarded, conditioned and even

cozy American Headquarters (especially General Headquarters, like of Eisenhower)? Moreover, no such establishments are mentioned for any subordinate commanders, who also take part in the battle; Datis and Artaphrenes are shown in PoikileStoa in Athens engaged in Combat, Mardonios was Killed-in-Action in Plataea (Her IX. 64) as were other Persian commanders in Mycale (Her IX.102) and Admirals in Salamis (Her VIII. 89). Thus there simply was one more level of Command in the Persian structure, reserved for the King-of-Kings. This might be the true meaning of Xerxes thinking that his troops in Artemisium fared ill due to the lack of his presence (Her VIII. 69). It may have been not just the watchful eye of the King, to deal rewards and punishments (Diod XI. 8,1), but also of the High-Command, to direct the battle against a sneaky enemy. This of course meant that the Greeks did not need to fool the Persians; it was enough to fool Xerxes, as supposedly happened in Salamis (Her VIII. 75).

In Thermopylae, this concept is obvious: The Persian High Command, despite the dismal battlefield performance, never lose control of their troops and the battle. Always at the ready, reserves lined up and sent as required (Diod XI.7,2), retreat allowed (Diod XI. 7,4) or denied (Diod XI. 8,3), panic waves contained (Her VII.212) and, most of all, adaptability: from the decision to attack with the elite troops in the first day (Her VII. 211), to take defenders unawares, to the change of method. The storm tactics of the first day (more than one- Her VII. 211) to the attrition attempt of the second day (Her VII. 212) to the holding action and flanking of the third (Her VII.213 & 223).

Xerxes throne and observation post in Thermopylae should have combined view of the prospective battlefield with security and safety. One could thus deduce that it should have been posted over the first gate, high up for better view but not on the main ridge; should the main ridge were attainable by that position, his troops would have flanked the position of the Greeks.

OPERATIONS

The Persian army was able to divide and follow parallel routes. After crossing at Europe in the Hellespont, but definitively from the muster and inventory count at Doriskos all the way to the Chalcidian peninsula, it is explicitly stated that it advanced in three routes (Her VII.121), although there is enough uncertainty as to these itineraries, as Herodotus is not very clear. From Therme, present day Thessaloniki the army follows, up to Thermopylae, one route and this route is always away from the sea (Her VII.131 and VII. 196-198). The army is not moving along the coast for mutual support with the fleet, a fact unforeseen by the Greek army of 10.000 who tried to intercept it before it enters into Thessaly, at Tempe (Her VII.173). Very probably it enjoys fleet transportation for replenishing provisions.

The expeditionary Standard Operating Procedure is for the fleet to subdue the coastal areas by landing infantry and cavalry parties (Her VIII.23) and the army to strike inland. Rendez-vous points are established for provisioning, in a way very similar to the operation planning of Alexander the great 1.5 centuries later in which case two possible meeting areas are obvious from special and temporal parameters, Alos in Pagasetic Gulf and the Maliac Gulf. Thus the Persians did not follow the coastal routes neither to enter Thessaly from Northern Greece, nor after Thermopylae to enter southern Greece (Her VIII.31). These areas, along with the island of Euboea and the east and south coastline of Attica were delegated to the fleet which carried a landing force of more than 40.000 troops (1200 capital vessels with 40 marines per ship –Her VII.184- as this was the number encountered and impressing the Persians in the naval battle of Lade in 494 BC in the Chian triremes – Her VI.15).

After Thermopylae, the Persian army was really vast for the mission at hand. It was a waste of resources and a bad practice logistics-wise not to put this numerical superiority, and the high mor-

al after the victory, to good effect and expand the occupation footprint. The western Greece, west of Pindus, was not into the operational planning of the Persians, although it was important enough a front in the Peloponnesian War. It is plausible that operations in that area were meant to take place after the subjugation of Peloponnesus, with the fleet moving northwards into the Ionian Sea. The Persian high command knew the geography of Greece due to the expatriates, and most of all due to Demaratos of Sparta (Her VII.209). This one must surely have informed Xerxes that his own ancestors, the Dorians, failed to invade Peloponnesus through the heavily fortified Isthmus (Her IX.26), but succeeded by emerging at the north of the Gulf of Patras and crossing at Rio, by ships built in Naupaktos, nearby (Paus Phocika XL-VIII.10). Given that this area, NW Peloponnesus (Achaia) was medizing heavily (Paus Achaika VI.3), it was natural to attempt a crossing there, especially after the varnage at Thermopylae, which could get worse at Isthmus. Thus, the Persian army once in Boeotia should have sent a division of some strength south-west to subjugate western Phocis and Aetolia and cross into Peloponnesus with ships to friendly territory, thus flanking the defenses at Isthmus. The rest of the army could advance to Athens to deliver punishment.

Although we do not fully appreciate it, this is exactly what happened! The abortive Persian raid to Delphi might have not been a plundering operation, as Herodotus thought. Plunder was within the scope, but not really the objective: Herodotus states that at Panopeus, a crossroad, the army divided in two, and the larger part continued to Boeotia and Attica, and the lesser part towards Delphi (Her VIII.35). Thus the two parts were unequal, but not vastly. It is not a group or some units dispatched, it is a hefty part of the army. This, according to previous practice means following two itineraries, with two separate objectives. The second force, moving westwards through, and not to, Delphi, intended to cross to Peloponnesus in Achaia, thus outmanoeuvring the Greek army

at Isthmus, as had happened in Tempe and eventually at Thermopylae. This course of action may have been decided after Thermopylae, at the staff meeting (Her VII.234-235) where Demaratus proposed landing at Kythera. So, a change of plans is possible after Thermopylae: south through Asopos gorge to Doris and Phocis, with the main body turning SE to Boeotia and Attica and another body dispatched to a western campaign. Other combinations of itineraries were possible, but the route chosen offered the best combination of security for the whole army, the least warning for the Greek high command and an easy access to Attica for the main body of the Army.

Themiracles at Delphi (Herod VIII. 38), which demoralized and pushed back this force to the rest of the army, did not just save the temple, but actually won the campaign. This corps after Delphi would have emerged to the north shore of the gulf of Korinth, easily occupying the coastal towns and commandeering vessels to cross to Peloponnesus in Rio, a replay of the invasion of the Dorians, with no Greek fleet to counter, nor any hostile coastal state to resist disembarkation as in Marathon.

This prospect coming to null, Xerxes had to opt either for an assault in Isthmus, or for a naval victory to be able to cross by sea to Eastern Peloponnesus, where Argos, bitterly hostile to Sparta, offered a safe bridgehead (Her VII.149). The terrible carnage in Thermopylae took a toll in Xerxes' psyche and decided not to seek land battle in straights, especially if augmented by defensive works, against massive Greek hoplite infantry. Thus he played the naval card at Salamis, at an inopportune moment: the time for naval operations in Greek waters was running thin and autumn gales might at any time exact even heavier casualties from his fleet than before, off Pelion (Her. VII.190) and destroy amphibious attempts. Once this card was burnt, he never contemplated that a ground assault in Isthmus would turn the tide and retreated his royal person to Persia (Her VIII.115), to prepare for possible retaliatory inva-

sions, leaving a much decreased, but fully capable occupation army way back, in Thessaly (Her VIII.113), north of Thermopylae, to re-establish the imperium to the areas he had retreated from. The invasion of Peloponnesus was not forthcoming-and history proved him right. Thermopylae and Delphi won the war for the Greeks long before rams and oars got blooded in Salamis.

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REZIME PONOVO O TERMOPILIMA

KLJUČNE REČI: TERMOPILI, LEONIDA, SPARTA, STARA GRČKA, RATNA TAKTIKA, SPECIJALNE OPERACIJE.

Bitka koja je presudno uticala na naše poimanje grčko-persijskih ratova i antičkog vojevanja još uvek sa sobom nosi brojne skrivene ili nerazjašnjene podatke. Oni se ne uklapaju u domen uobičajenih tumačenja, a mogu se objasniti samo nakon pažljivog posmatranja, čitanja i zaključivanja. Ko su zaista bili Leonidini vojnici, njih 300? Uobičajeno je mišljenje da je Fokidski zid pregrađivao Termopilski klanac. Međutim, on bi ujedno presecio i najbolju moguću saobraćajnu komunikaciju. Najverovatnije je da se nalazio u blizini, otvoren kružni put koji se spušta sa stena, ne ometa saobraćaj, ali omogućava kontrolu i možda presretanje projektila.

Persijanci nakon pobede nikad više nisu prošli ovim klancem, već su birali druge pravce, što se kosi sa logikom izbora za mesto bitke; izgleda da je ona pre bila demonstracija moći, nego istinska potreba u sastavu ratne operacije. Grčka taktika, o kojoj piše Herodot, ukazuje kako na uobičajenu vežbu hoplitskih jedinica, a koja se sastojala od njihovog jedinica kroz bojne redove, kao i na spartanski taktiku bacanja projektila, manje ili više sličnu Ekdromiju, o kojem je kasnije pisao Ksenofon (Hellenika, knj. IV, 5), doduše izvedenu obrnutim redosledom. Na kraju, politika iz vremena Herodota svakako nije dopuštala da se govori o noćnom napadu Spartanaca na persijski logor, o kojem je kasnije pisao Diodor, niti o pravim razlozima zbog kojih fokidske jedinice nisu uspele da zadrže svoje položaje. Zatečeni, oni su radije birali da prepreče Persijancima put ka Fokidi, njihovoj domovini, nego ka Leonidi i njegovoj vojsci.