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ABHANDLUNGEN

THE PERSIAN WARS AGAINST GREECE: A REASSESSMENT

The Persians lost their wars in Greece, in part, because the triumphant Greeks wrote the histories and other texts that survive; and they stressed their victories as inevitable and foreordained. By 472 B.C., just eight years after the battle of Salamis, that Greek view had become well advanced;¹ and by the fourth century, it had become the standard interpretation.² Thus, the “Great Event” of European historiography as narrated by Herodotus, the Greek defeat of the Persian army and navy commanded by Xerxes, the “Great King, the King of Kings,” became indelibly imbedded in the historical subconscious of our western minds.³ Yet, amid all the ancient explanations about excessive Persian *hybris* and despotic indifference to human dignity in contrast to Greek freedom, initiative, and *areté*, it was the critical Thucydides who noted that the Persians were defeated mainly through their own errors.⁴

One significant aspect of both Aeschylus’ tragic drama of the Persian failures and Herodotus’ historical study was to exaggerate the magnitude of the Persian forces in order to heighten and, therefore, to focus sharply upon the military powers of what would appear as the victory of meager yet super heroic Greeks. All calculations as to the Persian demands for local grain and fresh water while in Greece leads us to the conclusion that the Persian forces were not vastly superior in number, as the ancient authors claimed, but about equal to those of the Greeks.⁵ Thus, we are required by that observation to reassess the reasons why the Persians lost their wars in Greece; and to set aside the ancient idea of the victory of Athenian democracy, no matter how slight in power, over the indomitable forces of the enslaving oriental despotism of Achaemenid Persia. Let us, therefore, return to Thucydides’ often overlooked observation and ask what were the Persian military errors in Greece. Certainly they were far more complex than noted by the Byzantine scholiast that King Xerxes and the Persian navy had simply erred in trying to fight in the narrow straits of Salamis.

¹ Aeschylus *Persae*.

² Chester G. Starr, “Why did the Greeks Defeat the Persians?” *Parola del Passato* 17 (1962), 321–32.

³ Robert Drews, *The Greek Accounts of Eastern History* (Washington D.C. 1973), 69–72.

⁴ Thuc. 1.69.5.

⁵ T. Cuyler Young, Jr. “480/479 B.C.—A Persian Perspective,” *Iranica Antiqua* 15 (1980), 213–39.

With King Darius' invasion of European Thrace and the northern Scythian regions in 513 B.C., an Achaemenid imperial policy of expansion toward Greece had begun.⁶ With the southern Thracian regions administratively tied to the major satrapal center at Sardis in western Asia Minor, Macedonia to the west first allied with Persia as an autonomous kingdom with privileged vassalage status. Then, with Mardonios' invasion of Thrace in 492 B.C., Macedonia became a fully subordinate region of the Persian Empire.⁷ It had not been the reckless Athenian attack upon Sardis in 498 B.C., that spurred the Persians into Greece, but rather the new imperial policies of the Great King after 520 B.C., to expand into Egypt and Nubia, into western India, and into European Thrace, Macedonia, then Greece and ultimately Athens. But unlike Egypt, Nubia, and India, Thrace and Greece lay across the formidable Hellespont, as Aeschylus reminds us.⁸

The coastal zones of Thrace were controlled by a loosely organized string of Persian fortresses and garrisons, and Macedonia often appealed to both the Persians and the Greeks with diplomatic acts of duplicity. Persian control of the northern Aegean coastal area up to Mt. Olympos, therefore, may have posed significant logistical problems for the Persian commissariat to amass and store supplies for the campaign toward Athens. Nevertheless, between the autumn of 492 and the autumn of 480 B.C., there is no indication of military uprisings against the Persians in that northern area of Greeks, Macedonians, and Thracians. Loosely organized though that area may have been it appears not to have posed a strategical threat to the Persian lines of communication. But since Thrace and Macedonia could only be reached by sea, once King Xerxes' troops dismantled the two pontoon bridges that spanned the Hellespont, the supplies that had supported Persian forces during the land conquests of India, Egypt, and Nubia were critically lacking for the Persian conquest of Greece. Our ancient sources do not indicate that new Persian supply ships came to Xerxes' support once his own supply fleet entered the European waters.

The problems of the shortage of supplies began to appear as the Persians entered Thessaly south of Mt. Olympos and began their long approach to the critical pass at Thermopylae. Following the battle at that pass, food shortages necessitated that the Persians had to act militarily sooner than would have been desirable. At Salamis and at Plataia, if the Persians could have waited perhaps two to four weeks before engaging the Greek forces, the small united Greek defenses would have crumbled, as parochial and often antagonistic Greek states would have withdrawn from the engagements and called their forces

⁶ Albert T. Olmstead, "Persia and the Greek Frontier Problem," *CP* (1939), 305–22.

⁷ Jack M. Balcer, "Persian Occupied Thrace (Skudra)," *Historia* 37 (1988), 1–21.

⁸ Aesch. *Pers.* 65–72, 745–748, 798–799.

home; or at least for the Peloponnesian states to gather behind their isthmian wall, far to the south of Attica and Boiotia, the military crucible of the “Great Event.” The thesis of this article, therefore, is that time and supplies became the critical factors that led to the Persian failures and defeat in Greece, thus the errors alluded to by Thucydides. Neither factor was foreordained, nor necessarily inevitable.

In 513 B.C., the Persian imperial policy had been to expand into Europe gradually, and by 492 B.C., following the Athenian and Ionian attack upon Persian Sardis and the Ionian Revolt, King Darius’ orders to his general Mardonios were clear and direct: pillage, burn, and enslave Athens. Implicit in the king’s commands were the imperial directives to control central Greece, Euboea, and Attica, and to attempt the Persian control of Sparta and the Peloponnesos. As with the subjugation of the rebellious Asian nations in 522–520 B.C.,⁹ and the subsequent conquests of India, Egypt, Nubia, and European Thrace, Darius again commanded a methodical and thorough conquest and provincial incorporation of Greece into the Achaemenid Empire. Mardonios would begin the penetration from the north. During the preceding Ionian Revolt, Persian control of Thrace had weakened and two of several goals set before Mardonios were the recontrol of western Thrace and reunion with Macedonia.¹⁰ With a two-pronged military force, Mardonios attacked the rebellious northern island of Thasos, which fell quickly to his navy, and Macedonia, which lost its former privileged status and became an imperial state fully recognizing Darius’ suzerainty. But sailing around the Akte peninsula at Mt. Athos, Mardonios lost half of his fleet to northern storms, and then his army suffered a serious defeat at the hands of the Brygi tribe of western Thrace.¹¹

Mardonios returned to Asia seriously wounded and in need of new forces and supplies. Darius’ military strategy and diplomacy, which had for thirty years created a powerful Empire, now faltered amidst a series of strategic miscalculations. Mardonios’ setback was only temporary and the policy of penetrating Greece from the north acutely sound. But the victor of the Ionian Revolt, general Datis who temporarily replaced in command the recovering Mardonios, advised Darius to abandon that policy and, instead, to dispatch a fleet directly across the Aegean to attack first the Greek state of Eretria and

⁹ Jack M. Balcer, *Herodotus & Bisitun* (Wiesbaden 1987), 119–52.

¹⁰ Hdt. 6.44–5.

¹¹ This paper reflects the studies of Olmstead (note 6 above); Charles Hignett, *Xerxes’ Invasion of Greece* (Oxford 1963); and Peter Green, *Xerxes at Salamis* (New York 1970). See also Olmstead, “Oriental Imperialism,” *AHR* 22 (1918), 755–62; A. R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks: The Defense of the West, c. 546–478 B.C.* (New York 1962); Josef Wolski, “Les Grecs et les Ioniens au temps des Guerres médiques,” *Eos* 58 (1969), 33–49; Anthony J. Podlecki, *Life of Themistocles* (Montreal 1975).

then Athens.¹² In preparation, Persian heralds traveled throughout Greece demanding the recognition of Persian suzerainty and the Zoroastrian symbols of earth and water, the marks of vassalage, while other heralds visited the coastal states throughout Darius' Asian Empire with the king's order to prepare large ships and horse transports for Datis' expedition. As the king's vassals complied with the order, the eastern Greek states of Asia Minor placidly submitted to Darius' overlordship and joined the Persian attack upon Athens. The Greek island of Aigina, in sight of Athens, offered the vassal's earth and water and escaped Datis' destructive blows. From Asia, the exiled Athenian tyrant Hippias urged on the Persian attack. And from Sparta, the exiled Basileus Damaratos also joined Persia's forces for the conquest of Greece. The petty parochialism and antagonisms that had plagued the East Greeks during the Ionian Revolt also abounded in mainland Greece. If only the Persian forces could wait for that parochialism to fracture the Greek forces, the Persians could gain Greece and transform it into the satrapy of Ionia; but at each major event the lack of food and supplies forced the Persians to attack before the Greek military fractures occurred.

In Cilicia, Datis mustered his fleet and set sail for Ionia and Samos. Herodotus reported a fleet of 600 triremes,¹³ yet a number one-half to one-third of that reported is more realistic.¹⁴ From loyal Samos, Datis set sail for Naxos in the mid-Aegean, and with an auspicious beginning to his expedition, captured and enchain many Naxians, and burned and plundered their city and temples.¹⁵ Datis then set sail for Eretria, entered her harbor, besieged the city, plundered it, and burned its temples in revenge for the destruction of the temples in Sardis; and in accord with Darius' commands enchain the inhabitants for deportation to Mesopotamian Susa.¹⁶ Two leading Eretrian aristocrats, perhaps part of a greater political faction, had betrayed their city.¹⁷ Political factionalism ran rife throughout the mainland Greek states, and

¹² Hdt. 6.46–120.

¹³ Hdt. 6.95.2.

¹⁴ Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion*, 345–50; Konrad Kraft, "Bemerkungen zu den Perserkriegen," *Hermes* 92 (1964), 153–8; Chr. Blinkenberg, *Die lindische Tempelchronik* (Bonn 1915), § 32, pp. 26–9, this is uncertain as the name of the Persian [st]rategos can be restored as Datis, Artaphrenes, or another. Datis is only a possibility in a difficult text, yet 43 (D) while questionable in regard to origin does note Datis the *nauarchos* of Darius, line 26.

¹⁵ R. R. Holloway, "The Crown of Naxos," *American Numismatic Society Museum Notes* 10 (1962), 1–8.

¹⁶ Professor Pierre Ducrey, University of Lausanne, and excavator of Eretria, in a personal letter, dated 21 November 1978, noted: "What I know about the 'Perserschutt' is very little. Personally I have never seen any sure trace of this famous destruction layer."

¹⁷ Hdt. 6.101; Paus. 7.10.2; Euphorbos (Josef Hofstetter, *Die Griechen in Persien* [Berlin 1978], n. 109, p. 65) and Philagros (n. 255, p. 149), leading men of the asty to whom Darius gave great grants of land for their services, Plut. *de Garr.* 15 = Mor. 510B.

Persian experience with similar Greek factionalism during the Ionian Revolt had made the Persians very aware of that Greek phenomenon. The Persians knew, therefore, that if they could wait for factionalism to disperse the opposing Greek forces, the Persian conquest of Greece and creation of the satrapy of Ionia could be accomplished. The Persian destructions of Miletos, Naxos, and Eretria signaled warnings to the Athenians and others who had not bowed to Darius' demands that his imperial might would wield similar punishment.

Datis had fervently hoped that Athenian factionalism, and the Peisistratid faction in particular, would divide Athens' resistance to his conquest and promote the reinstatement of Peisistratid Hippias, then aboard Datis' ship, as governor and tyrant of Athens. The Persian burning of neighboring Eretria had neither factionalized Athens to the point of open civil war nor weakened Athens' resistance, and on the plain of Marathon Datis faced the Athenian army and some Plataians drawn up to meet him. After numerous delays, the Persians attempting to gather supplies and waiting for the Peisistratid faction to gain control of Athens (which it never did) and the Athenians waiting for Spartan assistance (which came too late), the Athenians and Plataians attacked Datis' forces and won the battle.¹⁸ Both Datis and Hippias, however, still hoped that the Athenians would surrender when the Persian Imperial Fleet sailed into Athens' Phaleron Bay. But the Athenians continued their unified resistance and mustered at Phaleron to confront Datis' fleet. Datis' initial strategic error had been to limit his forces to a naval attack and not continue Mardonios' penetration from the north. To have relied upon perhaps two hundred ships for all supplies, food, water, cavalry supplies, and equipment, created for the Persians a significant reliance upon gaining food and supplies for the soldiers from the Greek lands, and also the food and water for the Persian cavalry, coupled with the necessity to exercise daily its horses, which apparently had been some of the critical issues forcing Datis to land at Marathon.

Mardonios' choice of a northern route gave the Persians Greek and Macedonian forces that supported the Persians and served the Great King as

¹⁸ Fritz Schachermeyr, "Marathon und die persische Politik," *Historische Zeitschrift* 172 (1951), 1–35; W. K. Pritchett, *Marathon: University of California Publications in Classical Archaeology* 4.2 (Berkeley 1960), 137–75; N. G. L. Hammond, "The Campaign and Battle of Marathon," *JHS* 88 (1968), 13–57; accepted Hdt.'s figures for troops, 31–3; G. L. Cawkwell, "The Power of Persia," *Arepo* 1 (1968), 3; A. T. Hodge, "Marathon: The Persian's Voyage," *TAPA* 105 (1975), 155–73; P. Bicknell, "The Command Structure and Generals of the Marathon Campaign," *AC* 39 (1970), 427–42; A. W. Gomme, "Herodotus and Marathon," *More Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford 1962), 29–37, from *Phoenix* 6 (1952), 77–83, rejected the Herodotean indication of Athenian factionalism during the Marathon period, p. 37, and suspected an Ionian report to the Athenians that "the cavalry are away" as the signal to the Athenians to attack.

military vassals. In contrast, Datis' limited forces and Hippias' inability to generate rebellion within Athens brought about the Persian failures at Marathon and Phaleron. Datis, severely limited by the lack of supplies, could do nothing but return to Asia. In flight and in despair, Hippias died at Lemnos before reaching Asia Minor,¹⁹ and Datis returned to Susa with only the Eretrians in chains. Athens had not been taken. The clash at Marathon demonstrated that the Athenian army could beat the Persians on land, something the Ionians had failed to accomplish. Yet, fundamentally, the Persian loss at Marathon was because of several Persian errors: a severely limited force as determined by the set space of the ships and the need for food and other supplies.

For Darius, the failure at Athens was only a temporary interruption within his greater imperial policy of a steady frontier advance into Europe and the conquest of Greece. New taxes would be levied and new armies would be raised. Throughout the Empire, the Persian heralds again announced Darius' imperial commands to equip an army, to provide ships and horses, and to supply the army with grain supplies for the new attack.²⁰ For three years, between 489–487 B.C., the subjected nations prepared to meet the king's demands, as imperial officers enrolled subjects for military service in Greece.

The burdens of taxation and the extensive loss of soldiers and sailors became more than many of Persia's subjects could bear. To overthrow those burdens, the Egyptians revolted in 486 B.C.²¹ The Egyptians, who had long served in the Persian Imperial Fleet, were relatively secure from Persia except through the Sinai passes, yet struggled unsuccessfully for three years to shake off Persian overlordship. Egypt, far more crucial in wealth and manpower than rebellious Athens, demanded Darius' full attention. If Egypt could maintain her rebellion for more than three years or become independent, rebellions in the eastern and central satrapies would then erupt and, perhaps, destroy the Empire. Factionalism also threatened to disrupt the great Achaemenid Empire, as did the heavy Persian demands from her vassals for grain and supplies to support the imperial forces directed against Athens.

Unfortunately for the Achaemenid Empire, before Darius could suppress the revolt of Egypt, the Great King died in November of 486 B.C. Xerxes, his

¹⁹ *Suda* s. v. Hippias.

²⁰ Hdt. 7.1.2; Olmstead, "Persia and the Greek Frontier Problem," *CP* 34 (1939), 313; and *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago 1948), 227; noted: In June of 486 B.C., the Babylonian Nabu-ittanu reported home that Shatamksu and Nubagaza, the majordomo, had informed him that according to the King's Law he must pay a new toll on the barley, wheat, and mustard that he was bringing through the storehouse on a Babylonian canal. They told him: "It was determined, before the judge it was recorded" (*Vorderasiatische Sprachdenkmäler* III, no. 159).

²¹ Hdt. 7.1.3.

heir apparent,²² succeeded to the royal throne and in his second year quelled the revolt of Egypt. Leading the Royal Armies, Xerxes invaded Egypt and by early January 484 B.C., recovered that valuable satrapy. Xerxes dealt harshly with the rebels: he confiscated properties from the temples and imposed new taxes upon the natives.²³

Trouble had erupted also in Judah in 486 B.C., a rebellion that Xerxes quickly suppressed as he marched against Egypt.²⁴ Of this we know almost nothing except to suspect that the social and religious problems elaborated upon in the book of Malachai may shed a faint glimmer of light upon them; but, unfortunately, we know nothing of the outcome nor of the new imperial regulations that Xerxes may have imposed.²⁵

In 486 B.C., following his victory in Egypt, Xerxes then listened to the military plans of Mardonios for the immediate preparation for a third expedition against Athens.²⁶ The gradual and methodical penetration of Greece from the north would laud Xerxes as an heroic Achaemenid King. The fulfillment of his father's military goals in Europe and the conquest of Greece as the satrapy of Ionia,²⁷ would raise Xerxes' military and kingly stature to the rank of Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius. At Persepolis and at Susa, Xerxes also wanted to complete at great expense the construction of the sumptuous imperial buildings, and to order inscriptions carved into stone that he, Xerxes, had completed Darius' works.²⁸ In addition, Xerxes would purify his father's imperial cult of Zoroastrianism and set about to destroy the early Iranian cults

²² Hdt. 7.2-5.1.

²³ Georges Posener, *La première domination Perse en Egypte* (Cairo 1936), nos. 43-77; Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, 235-7. To establish firm Persian command in Egypt, Xerxes appointed his brother Achaimenes to the satrapal throne, as the former satrap Pherendates had apparently been killed in the revolt.

²⁴ Ezra 4:6; J. M. Myers, *The Anchor Bible: Ezra, Nehemiah* (Garden City 1965), 36-7; J. Morgenstern, "Jerusalem - 485 B.C.," *HUCA* 27 (1956), 100-79; "Jerusalem - 485 B.C. (continued)," *HUCA* 28 (1957), 15-47; "Jerusalem - 485 B.C. (concluded)," *HUCA* 31 (1960), 1-29; "Further Light from the Book of Isaiah upon the Catastrophe of 485 B.C.," *HUCA* 37 (1966), 1-28; T. A. Busink, *Der Tempel von Jerusalem von Salomo bis Herodes*, Vol. 2, *von Ezechiel bis Middot* (Leiden 1980), 842-52.

²⁵ M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (New York), 316; J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia 1959), 360, commented: "The view of J. Morgenstern that a major rebellion in 485 led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the massacre or enslavement of much of the population, although penetratingly developed, is too largely inferential." P. R. Ackroyd, *Israel under Babylon and Persia* (Oxford 1970), 173.

²⁶ Hdt. 7.5-6.

²⁷ Arist. *Ach.* 100, "The pious minded Xerxes (greats) those upon the waters being the Ionian satrapy"; Wilhelm Brandenstein, "Der persische Satz bei Aristophanes, 'Αχαρνῆς, Vers. 100." *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens* 8 (1964), 43-58.

²⁸ Roland G. Kent, *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, 2nd ed. (New Haven 1953), XPa-f.

of the daevas, alien and incompatible with the worship of Ahura Mazda, and his military defender Mithra.²⁹ The conquest and punishment of rebellious Athens, which had aided the rebellious Ionians and the burning of Sardis in 498 B.C., would be no greater burden than these new goals; and upon Athens Xerxes himself would place the “yoke of vassalage.”³⁰ Ruling nobles from Thessaly,³¹ and the Peisistratid faction from Athens³² had traveled to the king in Susa and had urged him to invade Greece. They would be his vassals, as he would assure their political rule.³³ The positive aspects of Greek assistance to the Persians, the treasonous activities of medism, were reaping their reward for Xerxes.³⁴ While some Greeks feared Persian destruction if they resisted the Great King, others sought his favors for their factional advantages.³⁵

To complete Darius’ work in Greece and at Persepolis and Susa, then became Xerxes’ obsession. His obsession would not be realized for following the rebellions of Judah and Egypt, we suspect that the Persian officers found it more and more difficult to supply the new army being gathered to attack Greece.

For four years, Xerxes and Mardonios prepared for the conquest of Greece (484–481 B.C.) and in the fifth year began the long and arduous march toward Athens (480 B.C.).³⁶ His subject nations had gathered ships, mustered their ranking cavalry and infantry forces, prepared the horse transports, and stockpiled grain supplies,³⁷ which would prove to be, in Greece, less than adequate. And for about three years, workers had been digging a canal through the soft sandy marl at the base of the otherwise formidable rocky Akte peninsula.³⁸ Mardonios would not risk another naval disaster rounding Mt. Athos.

²⁹ Kent, *Old Persian*, XPh; W. T. in der Smitten, “Xerxes und die Daeva,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 30 (1973), 368a–369b.

³⁰ Hdt. 7.8.1.

³¹ Pindar *Pyth.* 10.71–2 (cf. Hdt. 3.96, 7.108); F. Hiller von Gaertringen, “Das Königtum bei den Thessalern,” in *Aus der Anomia* (Berlin 1890), 1–16; M. Nilsson, *Mycenaean Origins of Greek Mythology* (Berkeley 1932), 233–4; H. D. Westlake, “The Medism of Thessaly,” *JHS* 56 (1936), 12–24; F. Hermann, “Die Silbermünzen von Larissa in Thessalien,” *Zeitschrift für Numismatik* 35 (1924), 3–18.

³² Themistokles’ faction in Athens had begun a systematic attack through ostracism to uproot the medizing Peisistratid faction, Jack M. Balcer, “Athenian Politics: The Ten Years after Marathon,” in T. E. Gregory and A. J. Podlecki (eds.), *Panathenaia: Studies in Athenian Life and Thought in the Classical Age* (Lawrence 1979), 27–49.

³³ Hdt. 7.6.2.

³⁴ J. Wolski, “Μηδισμός et son importance en Grèce à l’époque des Guerres médiques,” *Historia* 22 (1973), 3–15; Daniel Gillis, *Collaboration with the Persians* (Wiesbaden 1979); David F. Graf, “Medism: The Origin and Significance of the Term,” *JHS* 104 (1984), 15–30.

³⁵ “Medism” entailed the swearing of oaths with the Persians (δρκιστομεῖ), Plut. *Them.* 21.7.

³⁶ Hdt. 7.20.

³⁷ Hdt. 7.21.

³⁸ Hdt. 7.22.1.

From Sardis in the autumn of 481 B.C., Xerxes dispatched heralds to Greece to demand once again the diplomatic and religious symbols of earth and water, and to establish hostilities for his personal expedition against Athens.³⁹ But this time he would not offer amnesty to Athens or Sparta.⁴⁰ They were destined for destruction. Confident in his plan, sanctioned by the grace of Ahura Mazda whose sacred chariot the Great King would accompany to Athens,⁴¹ Xerxes ordered the Greek spies caught at Sardis be shown the vast array of his military forces and then be released to report to the Greeks the power of his Persian Empire.⁴² In the spring of 480 B.C., Xerxes commanded the Persian Imperial Fleet to muster offshore in the harbors of Ionia and, on the plain of Sardis, he gathered half of the regular troops of the Persian Army, three of six divisions.⁴³ Sizable though this force may have been, it was a costly drain upon the Persian Empire in taxes, monies, supplies, and men; meanwhile in Greece the Persian commissariat was finding it exceedingly difficult to gather sufficient local supplies of food and water for that new military expedition.

Because Xerxes was unable to resupply his landed and naval forces in Greece once they left Asia for Thrace, the expedition was significantly weakened from the start. Xerxes' high hopes had failed to assess carefully the flaws in the Persian imperial military system, which would hinder and then halt the Persian conquest of Greece. The recent wars in Asia Minor, Thrace, and Scythia had taken many lives and had weakened the Persian Imperial Army to the point that further losses in Greece would seriously overstrain the military. Wars in Cyprus and the Egyptian and Jewish rebellions had acutely accentuated that military stress. And, to compound those problems, civil war erupted in Babylonia, and additional important military forces were lost.

In August of 482 B.C., revolution had erupted in Babylon as the noble Belshimanni arose, killed the Persian satrap, and performed according to ritual custom the ancient New Year's Festival by grasping the hand of the god Marduk-Bel. Against this native pretender, who claimed the titles "King of Babylon" and "King of Lands," Xerxes dispatched the general Megabyzos, who promptly took the city. In retribution, the Persians carried off the solid gold eighteen-foot statue of the god, weighing almost eight hundred pounds, and melted it down as bullion. Xerxes destroyed Babylon and the city lost its

³⁹ Hdt. 7.32.

⁴⁰ Hdt. confused the issue (7.133.1-2) by writing that Persian heralds had commanded Athens and Sparta to submit. The Athenians and Spartans had thrown the heralds into a well and a pit. Hdt. then tantalizingly noted that not those events but "another reason" brought the war and Persian punishment. K. Kraft, "Bemerkungen zu den Perserkriegen," *Hermes* 92 (1964), 144-53; R. Sealey, "The Pit and the Well: The Persian Heralds of 491 B.C.," *CJ* 72 (1976), 13-20.

⁴¹ Hdt. 7.40.4.

⁴² Hdt. 7.146-7.

⁴³ Olmstead, "Persia and the Greek Frontier Problem," *CP* 34 (1939), 314.

last major vestige of imperial significance. During his march from Susa to Sardis in 481 B.C., Xerxes inflicted harsh blows upon Babylon and in political vengeance upon the rebellious Babylonians destroyed their ancient and sacred temple of Marduk Bel.⁴⁴ In spite of the gold obtained from Babylon, the Persian forces about to attack Greece were further hampered by the costs and military losses in the Babylonian rebellion.

The burdens of taxation and the Egyptian and Jewish rebellions had helped trigger the Babylonian rebellion, and perhaps other riots and rebellions for which we have no record. For Xerxes and his Achaemenid Empire, Babylonia was exceedingly important and far more crucial than Cyprus, Egypt, or Ionia and Thrace. The violence heaped upon Babylon boldly underscored the magnitude and the significance of the Babylonian rebellion and Xerxes' forceful suppression of the Babylonians. Hencefore, the Persians ferociously taxed the Babylonians, now amalgamated into a new satrapy with the Assyrians.⁴⁵

While Xerxes' forces gathered at Sardis during the early spring days of 480 B.C., as the warm breezes signaled the time to prepare the two pontoon bridges for the crossing of the Hellespont,⁴⁶ any major military failure during the Greek campaign would end Xerxes' plans to conquer Greece and create the complex conditions of extended societal distortion throughout the Empire and, perhaps, set off a chain reaction of rebellions.

It was also necessary to assure that the potentially recalcitrant Ionians, Egyptians, Jews, and Babylonians, recently rebellious and still smarting from newly imposed rules of harsh subjugation, would remain loyal and not thwart Xerxes' military efforts to subjugate the mainland Greeks. If Herodotus' account is correct, the Persian general Artabanois earnestly advised his king not to deploy the Ionians because he questioned their political reliability.⁴⁷ But Xerxes rebutted Artabanois' arguments⁴⁸ and successfully if not surprisingly maintained the stalwart military loyalty of his vassal contingents.

Across Thrace and Macedonia, Xerxes' land and naval forces proceeded without opposition. Thessaly quickly submitted as did the other Greek regions of Malis, Lokris, and all of Boiotia except the two small towns of

⁴⁴ George G. Cameron, "Darius and Xerxes in Babylonia," *AJS* 58 (1941), 314–25; Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, 237 and n. 23; Joan M. Bigwood, "Ctesias' Description of Babylon," *AJAH* 3 (1978), 32–51.

⁴⁵ Hdt. 3.92; 7.63.

⁴⁶ Hdt. 7.33–56.

⁴⁷ Artabanois' counsel not to lead the Ionians against their πατέρων appears to be an Herodotean anachronism (7.51.2).

⁴⁸ Hdt. 7.51–2.

Thespiai and Plataia.⁴⁹ It was already clear to both sides that the Greeks from the Peloponnesos had no intention of offering serious opposition to the Persians north of the Corinthian isthmus. The punishment of Athens and the conquest of northern and central Greece appeared certain. As Xerxes approached the crucial pass at Thermopylae, more than half of the European Greeks had submitted to him as did Apollo's oracular shrine at Delphi. Attica and Athens would fall easily, as they did, and once Xerxes could control the Athenian fleet safely, he could then invade Argos by sea, which would declare itself openly pro-Persian. Then the Persians would drive a wedge between Corinth and Sparta, attack the isthmus by land, and defeat each of those two hostile states separately. Greek opposition to the Persians at Cape Artemision crumbled rapidly as did Spartan opposition at Thermopylae.⁵⁰ Even the loss of many Persian ships to storms did not encourage the Spartans to alter their policy of defending the Peloponnesos at the isthmus rather than Attica. The military confrontation at Cape Artemision, nevertheless, proved an invaluable experience to the Greeks; it dented the myth of Persian naval superiority. Yet, the Greeks scurried in haste to the protective shores of the island of Salamis, as Xerxes' light, fast-sailing Phoenician triremes pursued the heavier Greek vessels. On land, as the Persians burned Thespiai and Plataia, Xerxes entered Attica. Only a few Athenian zealots tried unsuccessfully to defend their acropolis. It, too, fell to the Persians, who systematically plundered and burned Athens and her temples.⁵¹ Victory was the king's.

The Imperial Army controlled Attica, a pro-Persian government of Peisistratids governed Athens, and the Imperial Fleet lay anchored in Athens' harbor at Phaleron. Panic seized the Greek fleet, which had paused at Salamis briefly to evacuate the civilian population to the Peloponnesos. The island of Salamis was in a veritable Persian trap and all but the interested Athenians, Aiginetans, and Megarians, peoples north of the isthmus, were anxious to escape before Xerxes sprang it. Victory again seemed to be within the king's grasp, as it was amply clear that the Corinthians and Spartans were determined to abandon the Athenians.

Had Xerxes at this point taken no further action, the few remaining Greek forces would have retreated to Corinth behind the isthmian wall. The

⁴⁹ Herrmann, "Die Silbermünzen von Larissa in Thessalien," *Zeitschrift für Numismatik* 35 (1924), 3–18; G. A. Papantonios, "Ο Μηδισμός τῶν Θεσσαλῶν, τῶν Βοιωτῶν καὶ τῶν Φωκέων," *Platon* 15 (1956), 18–30; Dietram Müller, "Von Doriskos nach Therme. Der Weg des Xerxes-Heeres durch Thrakien und Ostmakedonien," *Chiron* 5 (1975), 1–11; N. G. L. Hammond, "The Extent of Persian Occupation in Thrace," *Chiron* 10 (1980).

⁵⁰ J. F. Lazenby, "The Strategy of the Greeks in the Opening Campaign of the Persian War," *Hermes* 92 (1964), 264–84; Herbert Hörrhager, "Zu der Flottenoperation am Kap Artemision," *Chiron* 3 (1973), 433–59.

⁵¹ Hdt. 8.54.

Athenians, Megarians, and the Aeginetans would have been compelled to accept the terms of submission and vassalage; the Athenians and Aeginetans for a second time. With their naval forces incorporated into the Persian navy, the isthmian wall would have been outflanked and the Persian army would have had to confront but a few skirmishers.⁵² Yet Xerxes was intent upon conquering the Athenians and their fleet, to complete the submission of Athens to Persian rule, and to win another spectacular victory for his royal Achaemenid house.⁵³

The opportunity for a brilliant Persian success came in a note from the Athenian general Themistokles. The Greeks, he declared, were frightened and ready to flee, factionalism had shattered the Greek ranks, and he himself was willing to submit as a vassal for the reward of the title "King's Friend," the highest honor at the Persian court. Xerxes believed Themistokles' message because it was not only plausible but it was also what the king wanted to believe. Trouble was always brewing in the Achaemenid Empire and his presence in Asia was required. Nevertheless, dissensions among the Greek ranks, which Xerxes had counted upon, also ran rife. As the Spartans had abandoned their allies one after another, in haste each ally had made an alliance with the Persians and stressed pro-Persians sentiments earlier repressed. Among the Greeks effectively blocked up in the Bay of Salamis the divisive factors of parochialism and factionalism continued to exist. The Phoenician, Cypriot, and Ionian fleets with a triple line of ships blocked the eastern exit from Salamis Bay while the Egyptian fleet sailed to block the western exit. The resisting Greeks, bottled up, would soon exhaust their supplies and mutual fears would quicken the pace of factionalism and desertion from Salamis. Xerxes, therefore, ordered a direct attack upon the entrapped Greeks, who fought back desperately to escape. At first, the Persian attack succeeded, and Xerxes watched the Ionian Greeks beat the remaining Peloponnesian forces. But then the Aeginetans and Athenians broke through the imperial lines and counter-attacked. At the day's end, the Greeks had lost 40 ships, and the Persians perhaps a few more, although Herodotus suggested about 200 ships, for him a third of the Persian naval strength.⁵⁴

The Greek victory at Salamis significantly checked the Persian advance. While the Persians lost none of their recently acquired Greek territories, their

⁵² Hdt. 7.139.

⁵³ Fritz Schachermeyer, "Athen als Stadt der Großkönige," *Grazer Beiträge* 1 (1973) 211–20.

⁵⁴ N. G. L. Hammond, "The Battle of Salamis," *JHS* 76 (1956), 32–54; Richmond Lattimore, "Aeschylus on the Defeat of Xerxes," *Classical Studies in Honor of William Abbott Oldfather* (Urbana 1943), 82–93; W. Marg, "Zur Strategie der Schlacht bei Salamis," *Hermes* 90 (1962), 116–9; Arthur Ferrill, "Herodotus and the Strategy and Tactics of the Invasion of Xerxes," *AHR* 72 (1966), 102–15; Hermann Bengtson, "Zur Vorgeschichte der Schlacht bei Salamis," *Chiron* 1 (1971), 89–94; Frank J. Frost, "A Note on Xerxes at Salamis," *Historia* 22 (1973), 118–9.

army and navy sorely needed both supplies and reorganization. The combined forces in the wake of defeat required strong leadership: the army to succeed had to remain intact, and the navy could not suffer further reduction. The Greeks, on the other hand, encouraged by an unexpected victory, yet realizing their losses, continued to fear that by the following year the Persians would complete their conquest.

The Battle of Salamis was pivotal not just in the Persian defeat but in the series of strategic miscalculations, which Xerxes himself directed. He alone was responsible for the defeat by having ordered the offensive battle when a simple blockade would have been effective, and then he compounded his failure by becoming enraged and executing Phoenician captains for alleged cowardice.⁵⁵ Aware that his naval forces were perilously reduced, that both the army and navy sorely needed grain and supplies, and sensitive to possible Ionian defection,⁵⁶ Xerxes ordered his remaining Imperial Fleet to set sail for Asia.⁵⁷ The Persian army, now only one division, he dispatched with Mardonios in command to return to Thessaly for the winter, in order to gather the needed food and supplies. Xerxes' orders were for that army, in the following spring, to reoccupy Attica and to invade the Peloponnesos. But the Persian army could never succeed in entering the Peloponnesos without the support from the then absent Persian Imperial Fleet. The plan was faulty at best. The king himself retreated hurriedly by the northern land route to Sardis where he spent the next year maintaining communication with his scattered forces.⁵⁸

In Thessaly, Mardonios retained only one armed division composed of the elite Immortals, Persians, Medes, Eastern Scythians, Bactrians, and Indians, an army of eastern national groups and exclusively Indo-Iranian. This division contained the king's best fighting forces from Asia in addition to half the troops of European Greece, and apparently still matched in numbers the resisting Greeks; yet Xerxes had seriously reduced Mardonios' army. Xerxes had commanded Artabazos to march the second division to Thrace and guard the long Aegean coastal route. That decision was necessary yet destructive to the united Persian front against the Greeks: hence another strategic error. Xerxes commanded the third division to return to Ionia and guard western Asia Minor.

Xerxes had blundered several times: by believing Themistokles' note (regardless of its real intent to trick the king), by attacking the Greeks at Salamis rather than waiting until they had factionalized further, by failing to

⁵⁵ Hdt. 8.90, 100; cf. 8.92; 9.32; Diod. Sic. 11.19.4; Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion*, 245–6.

⁵⁶ Hdt. 8.97.1.

⁵⁷ Hdt. 8.103, 107.

⁵⁸ Hdt. 8.117.2.

have sufficient food and supplies in order to wait for that factionalization, by punishing the Phoenician captains, causing dissension among the Phoenician and Egyptian navies, and limiting his critically damaged Imperial Fleet, and by reducing Mardonios' land forces then cut off from the support of the Imperial Fleet and separated from the two other divisions in Thrace and in Asia Minor. The king's problems were further compounded by the development of rivalries among the Persian military leaders in Greece. When Xerxes returned to Asia, acute antagonism arose between Mardonios and Artabazos. Furthermore, the Empire could not sustain a new levy for troops, taxes, and grain supplies without increasing the factors of societal distortion to the level at which massive rebellions throughout the satrapies would again arise. This Xerxes clearly realized, that he himself had to command the interrupted and fractured Greek campaign from Sardis, where he could personally maintain control of his Empire.

From the palace at Sardis, Xerxes remained in contact with Artabazos and his army as they progressed westward.⁵⁹ In an attempt to lessen the ordeal upon the overtaxed Persian army, Mardonios dispatched the Persian vassal King Alexander of Macedon to Athens.⁶⁰ On behalf of the Great King, Alexander offered the Athenians a treaty of vassalage, the acceptance of subjugation but with generous terms, which included Xerxes' complete forgiveness of Athens' wrongs committed against Persia, Persian rebuilding of the destroyed Athenian temples, allowance for Athens to expand territorially at the expense of other Greek states, and a degree of self determination.⁶¹ By this alliance, Mardonios expected to control the Athenian fleet and become master of the Greek waters in order to develop a superior military force over the mainland and Peleponnesian Greeks.⁶² But the Athenians refused.⁶³ Sparta, on the other hand, simply failed to react to the possible fall of Athens to Persia, as Greek parochialism began to disrupt the brief military unity generated at Salamis. In this, the Persians still had a chance for success.

As spring approached in 479 B.C., Mardonios prepared to invade Attica and then to advance upon the Peleponnesos. His loyal Theban forces, however, advised him to remain in Boiotia to watch and wait as the Greeks factionalized.⁶⁴ The Thebans correctly noted that time, accentuated by Persian bribes rather than force of arms, would win over the recalcitrant Greeks.⁶⁵ That Mardonios ignored this sound advice generated another strategic Persian military blunder.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Hdt. 9.108.

⁶⁰ Hdt. 8.136.1.

⁶¹ Hdt. 8.140.1–2; cf. 8.144.2–3; 9.13.1.

⁶² Hdt. 8.136.2–3.

⁶³ Hdt. 8.143.

⁶⁴ Hdt. 9.2.1.

⁶⁵ στασιωτέων: Hdt. 9.2.3.

⁶⁶ Hdt. 9.3.1.

Ten months after Xerxes had seized Athens, in July of 479 B.C., Mardonios again occupied that city and controlled Greece from Macedonia through Thessaly and Boiotia to Athens and her harbors of Piraeus and Phaleron.⁶⁷ The Theban prediction of factionalism materialized as the Peloponnesians failed to support adequately the Athenian cause. The Athenians, consequently, fled once again to their ships and the island of Salamis.⁶⁸

Sparta, nevertheless, acted for her safety foremost and remained inactive, thus encouraging Mardonios' hopes for conquest following rampant parochialism and the failure of the Greek front.⁶⁹ At the isthmus, the defensive wall was complete and would hold against Mardonios' land forces, especially now that Athens' fleet had escaped the Persians. Without that fleet, the Persians could not by-pass the isthmian route and attack Sparta by sea. The Spartans seem not to have considered fully the ramifications of a Persian commanded Athenian fleet, had Athens submitted.⁷⁰

The Spartans wasted time vacillating until Peloponnesian allies convinced them of their folly, after which a Spartan reversal of attitude resulted in a march north against Mardonios.⁷¹ "At the very last second, fortune snatched victory from the Persians."⁷² Xerxes believed Mardonios would be victorious,⁷³ as through a vast network of communications Persian messages crossed the Aegean from Sardis to Athens⁷⁴ by means of a line of Persian fire beacons dotting the islands.⁷⁵ But Mardonios, wanting to hold Athens,⁷⁶ turned and marched toward western Attica (burning and destroying as he proceeded) to entrench his army in southern Boiotia where loyal Thebans could secure his necessary supplies as he awaited the confrontation by the Spartans.⁷⁷ At Plataia, the Persian forces ultimately clashed with the Greek land forces, and again a series of Persian strategic military errors gave victory to the Greeks.

The conflict at Plataia was crucial. At the central island of Delos the eastern Samians had rumored somewhat earlier that if the Greeks attacked and launched an all-out naval offensive, Ionia would rebel against the Great King. The Samians implied that the Persian army could not hold Ionia. Those rumors, while essentially unfounded, did add to Mardonios' burden of responsibility, especially at a time when a personal clash between Mardonios

⁶⁷ Hdt. 9.1.

⁶⁸ Hdt. 9.3.2.

⁶⁹ Hdt. 9.6.1.

⁷⁰ Hdt. 9.8.1-2.

⁷¹ Hdt. 9.9-10.

⁷² Olmstead, "Persia and the Greek Frontier Problem," *CP* 34 (1939), 320.

⁷³ Hdt. 1.130.3.

⁷⁴ Hdt. 1.130.4.

⁷⁵ Hdt. 9.3.1.

⁷⁶ Hdt. 9.12-3.

⁷⁷ Hdt. 9.13.2-3.

and Artabazos was smoldering. The Greeks, on the other hand, plagued with interstate feuding, rivalries, distrust, and bad faith, could fall victim to Mardonios' divide-and-conquer techniques, which would allow him to subdue systematically the Greek states. Fearing just that, the Greeks rallied to swear a common oath at Plataia as a formal insurance against factionalism.⁷⁸

After eleven days encamped at Plataia, Mardonios, vexed and angry,⁷⁹ sought relief supplies, and feared reinforcements would bolster the Greek army as the news reached him that the newly augmented Greek fleet had sailed for the eastern island of Samos. The news of the Greek attack upon Samos demanded that he battle and achieve a decisive Persian victory in order to force the Greeks to recall their fleet from Samos. With both Greek and Persian rations and water-supplies exhausted, a Persian victory now was absolutely necessary.

Athenians, determined to win in spite of Spartan obstinacy coupled with Spartan fear of Athenian submission to Persia, triumphed at Plataia. They gained contingents of other allied Greeks as the Persian cavalry failed to outflank the Greek heavy infantry.⁸⁰ The Persian light-armed infantry had pitted itself against the Spartan contingents, which broke through Persian lines to attack the Persian stockade;⁸¹ and Mardonios fatally entered the main line of battle. Persian strategic errors at Plataia marked the end of any hope for victory in Greece.⁸² Even amidst battle, Artabazos had advised Mardonios to retire, to resort to bribery, to await Greek factionalism to spread, and above all not to resort to armed conflict.⁸³

The Greeks, too, had erred in trying to maintain an advanced position on the plain, and when their surprise attack upon the Persians failed they found their lines of supplies and their rear flanks open to Persian attack. That error could have cost the Greeks the battle. With food and water scarce, the Greek leaders had decided to retire, which rapidly became a disorderly retreat, yet haltered by the stubborn Spartan captains. Had the Greeks withdrawn, their

⁷⁸ Lyk. *Leokr.* 81, c. 330 B.C.; Isoc. *Panegyrikos* 4.156; Diod Sic. 11.29.3; Marcus Tod, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions from 403 to 323 B.C.* (Oxford 1946), 240; G. Daux, "Le Serment de Platées," *RA* 17 (1941), 176–83; "Sermens amphictyoniques et le serment de 'Platées,'" in George Mylonas (ed.), *Studies Presented to David Moore Robinson* 2, 775–82; P. A. Brunt, "The Hellenic League," *Historia* 2 (1953/4), 135–62; A. E. Raubitschek, "The Covenant of Plataea," *TAPA* 91 (1960), 178–83; Peter Siewert, *Der Eid von Plataiai* (Munich 1972). Theopompos *FGrH* 115 F 153 branded the oath as a forgery; see Christian Habicht, "Falsche Urkunden zur Geschichte Athens im Zeitalter der Perserkriege," *Hermes* 89 (1961), 1–35.

⁷⁹ Hdt. 9.41; Plut. *Arist.* 15.1.

⁸⁰ Hdt. 9.21.3.

⁸¹ Hdt. 9.70.

⁸² G. B. Grundy, *The Great Persian War and its Preliminaries* (London 1901), 549, 554–5.

⁸³ Aristeides suppressed Athenian factionalism at Plataia, an oligarchic group determined to overthrow the "democratic" faction (Plut. *Arist.* 13).

coalition undoubtedly would have fractured, the Athenians would have submitted to the king, and the Peloponnesians would have retreated behind the isthmian wall. Mardonios could then have systematically subjugated the individual resistant states. As long as Mardonios was alive the Persians stood their ground, but with his death they fled in disorder.⁸⁴

The Persian army need not have lost at Plataia, had Artabazos cooperated with Mardonios. As his forces scattered amidst the Greek blow, Artabazos' army of almost equal force stood apart. Instead of entering the conflict as fresh Persian troops to sweep the Greeks back in rapid retreat into the Peloponnesos, Artabazos with a sizable force of men quickly returned to Asia.

Thus a series of events that began with the Egyptian and Jewish Revolutions, followed by the Babylonian Revolt, significantly marred King Xerxes' expedition against Greece from the start. In 480 B.C., therefore, on the eve of the Battle of Salamis, the Achaemenid Empire had been overtaxed for monies and men, and the subsequent series of strategic blunders enacted in Greece rested upon the inabilities of the Persians to wait before they either blockaded or attacked the Greeks. The shortage of food and supplies inevitably necessitated that the Persians act before the limited Greek forces factionalized, separated and reduced significantly their military opposition to the Persians. The initial Persian failure, however, had been King Darius' desire to cross the Bosporos and the Hellespont and to gather Greek European territories in order to create a satrapy of Ionia, thus of Greece. The two straits that separate Asia from Europe critically hampered the Persians from supplying their forces in southern Greece with the necessary supplies to complete that Achaemenid imperial policy to gain the Greek corner of southeastern Europe. The Persian military failures in the wars against Greece were then, as Thucydides noted, mainly through the Persians' own errors.

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⁸⁴ Hdt. 9.63-5.; Grundy, *The Great Persian War*, 16; Green, *Xerxes at Salamis*, 256-7.