Essay: How Useful is Herodotus’s account of the battle of Thermopylae?

The main source:

There are other sources Diodorus and Simonides but they are fragmentary and generally unreliable.

Well known-mythology grown up around the battle. Greeks and Particularly Spartans were keen to see it as a victory. Difficult for Herodotus to get at the truth as he was not there.

1. His numbers are precise. Generally Greeks were not always worried about exact numbers.

So we accept his numbers. He probably got them from a source in the Peloponnese.

1. ‘advance guard’ . Herodotus says there were more expected later. We can’t be sure of the truth of this. Possibly there were more coming but the pass fell more quickly than expected.
2. The Greeks were ‘not expecting the war to be decided so quickly’ –probably true.
3. Quite specific on events- debate on whether to stay. Actual details constructed by Herodotus.
4. 208-209: Scouts and conversation with Demaratus-did have Persian sources but wouldn’t know conversations. Creates a build up of tension in the story.
5. 210-212: waiting 4 days-quite likely.
6. Spartans tactics-not unlikely-unclear how that would have fitted in with the wall.
7. Anecdotal-Xerxes jumping up. Adds to the story of Xerxes being proud and arrogant. Contrast with Leonidas who would have actually been in the fighting.
8. Episode of Ephialtes telling Xerxes of the path. Detailed and includes his later flight north and eventually murder so probably from a local source and is reasonably accurate.
9. 214 Expresses own opinion: ‘ I find it totally incredible’. Elsewhere puts in his own opinion.
10. The Anopaea path-impossible to establish the accuracy. The role of the Phocians isunclear- H. doesn’t have a clear grasp of the action. Why were they taken by surprise.
11. 219-220: Leonidas sending others away.

Most of this probably came from a Spartan source based on the ‘story/myth’ built up after the battle.

Other alternatives to the last stand:

* Leonidas told the other Greeks to defend the back until reinforcements arrive or the Greeks won a big naval battle at Artemisium. But the Greeks melted away.
* It was a general confusion and the Greeks simply left without any real plan.

1. Aretmisium and Thermopylae tactically more closely linked than H describes.
2. Oracle of a king having to die to save Greece was probably made up later to add glory to the defeat.
3. Final fighting-accept this. Spartan stand glorified-Homeric struggle over the body of Leonidas.
4. Pro Athenian sources-‘Thebans kept as hostages’-anti Theban feeling in Athens in 420s.
5. Other sources only fragmentary : Diodorus mentions a night attack on the camp.

Conc: have to accept the main points. Is useful as to the main outcome of the battle. Less useful on tactics and strategy of the Greeks.

Glorious defeat when it was really a significant defeat.

The Spartans have been very successful in painting a defeat into a victory. Later sources and modern authors have accepted this. (including Film 300).

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