

Herodotus  
Excerpts from Book VII of *The Histories*  
Translated and Edited by A.D. Godley, 1921-24

CCI. King Xerxes lay encamped in Trachis in Malis and the Hellenes in the pass. This place is called Thermopylae by most of the Hellenes, but by the natives and their neighbors Pylae. Each lay encamped in these places. Xerxes was master of everything to the north from Trachis, and the Hellenes of all that lay toward the south on the mainland.

CCII. The Hellenes who awaited the Persians in that place were these: three hundred Spartan armed men; one thousand from Tegea and Mantinea, half from each place; one hundred and twenty from Orchomenus in Arcadia and one thousand from the rest of Arcadia; that many Arcadians, four hundred from Corinth, two hundred from Phlius, and eighty Mycenaeans. These were the Peloponnesians present; from Boeotia there were seven hundred Thespians and four hundred Thebans.

CCIII. In addition, the Opuntian Locrians in full force and one thousand Phocians came at the summons. The Hellenes had called upon them through messengers who told them that this was only the advance guard, that the rest of the allies were expected any day now, and that the sea was being watched, with the Athenians and Aeginetans and all those enrolled in the fleet on guard. There was nothing for them to be afraid of. The invader of Hellas was not a god but a human being, and there was not, and never would be, any mortal on whom some amount of evil was not bestowed at birth, with the greatest men receiving the largest share. The one marching against them was certain to fall from pride, since he was a mortal. When they heard this, the Locrians and Phocians marched to Trachis to help.

CCIV. Each city had its own general, but the one most admired and the leader of the whole army was a Lacedaemonian, Leonidas, son of Anaxandrides, son of Leon, son of Eurycratides, son of Anaxandrus, son of Eurycrates, son of Polydorus, son of Alcamenes, son of Teleclus, son of Archelaus, son of Hegesilaus, son of Doryssus, son of Leobotes, son of Echestratus, son of Agis, son of Eurysthenes, son of Aristodemus, son of Aristomachus, son of Cleodaeus, son of Hyllus, son of Heracles. Leonidas had gained the kingship at Sparta unexpectedly.

CCV. Since he had two older brothers, Cleomenes and Dorieus, he had renounced all thought of the kingship. Cleomenes, however, died without male offspring, and Dorieus, who had met his end in Sicily, was also no longer alive. The succession therefore fell to Leonidas since he was older than Anaxandrides' youngest son Cleombrotus and had married Cleomenes' daughter. He now came to Thermopylae with the appointed three hundred he had selected, all of whom had sons. He also brought those Thebans whom I counted among the number and whose general was Leontiades son of Eurymachus. Leonidas took pains to bring only the Thebans among the Hellenes, because they were accused of medizing; he summoned them to the war wishing to know whether they would send their men with him or openly refuse the Hellenic alliance. They sent the men but intended something quite different

CCVI. The Spartans sent the men with Leonidas on ahead so that the rest of the allies would see them and march, instead of medizing like the others if they learned that the Spartans were delaying.

At present the Carneia was in their way, but once they had completed the festival, they intended to leave a garrison at Sparta and march out in full force with all speed. The rest of the allies planned to do likewise, for the Olympiad coincided with these events. They accordingly sent their advance guard, not expecting the war at Thermopylae to be decided so quickly.

CCVII. This is what they intended, but the Hellenes at Thermopylae, when the Persians drew near the pass, fearfully took counsel whether to depart. The rest of the Peloponnesians were for returning to the Peloponnese and guarding the isthmus, but the Phocians and Locrians were greatly angered by this counsel. Leonidas voted to remain where they were and send messengers to the cities bidding them to send help, since they were too few to ward off the army of the Medes.

CCVIII. While they debated in this way, Xerxes sent a mounted scout to see how many there were and what they were doing. While he was still in Thessaly, he had heard that a small army was gathered there and that its leaders were Lacedaemonians, including Leonidas, who was of the Heracleid clan. Riding up to the camp, the horseman watched and spied out the place. He could, however, not see the whole camp, for it was impossible to see those posted inside the wall which they had rebuilt and were guarding. He did take note of those outside, whose arms lay in front of the wall, and it chanced that at that time the Lacedaemonians were posted there. He saw some of the men exercising naked and others combing their hair. He marvelled at the sight and took note of their numbers. When he had observed it all carefully, he rode back in leisure, since no one pursued him or paid him any attention at all. So he returned and told Xerxes all that he had seen.

CCIX. When Xerxes heard that, he could not comprehend the fact that the Lacedaemonians were actually, to the best of their ability, preparing to kill or be killed. What they did appeared laughable to him, so he sent for Demaratus the son of Ariston, who was in his camp. When this man arrived, he asked him about each of these matters, wanting to understand what it was that the Lacedaemonians were doing. Demaratus said, "You have already heard about these men from me, when we were setting out for Hellas, but when you heard, you mocked me, although I told you how I expected things to turn out. It is my greatest aim, O King, to be truthful in your presence. So hear me now. These men have come to fight us for the pass, and it for this that they are preparing. This is their custom: when they are about to risk their lives, they arrange their hair. Rest assured that if you overcome these men and those remaining behind at Sparta, there is no one else on earth who will raise his hands to withstand you, my King. You are now attacking the fairest kingdom in Hellas and men who are the very best." What he said seemed completely incredible to Xerxes, so he then asked how they, who were so few in number, would fight against his army. Demaratus answered, "My King, take me for a liar if this does not turn out as I say." So he spoke, but he did not persuade Xerxes.

CCX. He let four days go by, expecting them to run away at any minute. They did not leave, and it seemed to him that they stayed out of folly and lack of due respect. On the fifth day he became angry and sent the Medes and Cissians against them, bidding them take them prisoner and bring them into his presence. The Medes bore down upon the Hellenes and attacked. Many fell, but others attacked in turn, and they made it clear to everyone, especially to the king himself, that among so many people there were few real men. The battle lasted all day.

CCXI. When the Medes had been roughly handled, they retired, and the Persians whom the king called Immortals, led by Hydarnes, attacked in turn. It was thought that they would easily

accomplish the task. When they joined battle with the Hellenes, they fared neither better nor worse than the Median army, since they used shorter spears than the Hellenes and could not use their numbers fighting in a narrow space. The Lacedaemonians fought memorably, showing themselves skilled fighters amidst unskilled on many occasions, as when they would turn their backs and feign flight. The barbarians would see them fleeing and give chase with shouting and noise, but when the Lacedaemonians were overtaken, they would turn to face the barbarians and overthrow innumerable Persians. A few of the Spartans themselves were also slain. When the Persians could gain no inch of the pass, attacking by companies and in every other fashion, they withdrew.

CCXII. It is said that during these assaults in the battle the king, as he watched, jumped up three times from the throne in fear for his army. This, then, is how the fighting progressed, and on the next day the barbarians fought no better. They joined battle supposing that their enemies, being so few, were now disabled by wounds and could no longer resist. The Hellenes, however, stood ordered in ranks by nation, and each of them fought in turn, except the Phocians, who were posted on the mountain to guard the path. When the Persians found nothing different from what they saw the day before, they withdrew.

CCXIII. The king was at a loss as to how to deal with the present difficulty. Epialtes son of Eurydemus, a Malian, thinking he would get a great reward from the king, came to speak with him and told him of the path leading over the mountain to Thermopylae. In so doing he caused the destruction of the Hellenes remaining there. Later he fled into Thessaly in fear of the Lacedaemonians, and while he was in exile, a price was put on his head by the Pylagori when the Amphictyons assembled at Pylae. Still later he returned from exile to Anticyra and was killed by Athenades, a Trachinian. Athenades slew Epialtes for a different reason, which I will tell later in my history, but he was given no less honor by the Lacedaemonians. It was in this way, then, that Epialtes was later killed.

CCXIV. There is another story told, namely that Onetes son of Phanagoras, a Carystian, and Corydallus of Anticyra are the ones who gave the king this information and guided the Persians around the mountain, but I find it totally incredible. One must judge by the fact that the Pylagori set a price not on Onetes and Corydallus but on Epialtes the Trachinian, and I suppose they had exact knowledge; furthermore, we know that Epialtes was banished on this charge. Onetes might have known the path, although he was not a Malian, if he had often come to that country, but Epialtes was the one who guided them along the path around the mountain. It is he whom I put on record as guilty.

CCXV. Xerxes was pleased by what Epialtes promised to accomplish. He immediately became overjoyed and sent out Hydarnes and the men under Hydarnes command, who set forth from the camp at about lamp-lighting time. This path had been discovered by the native Malians, who used it to guide the Thessalians into Phocis when the Phocians had fenced off the pass with a wall and were sheltered from the war. So long ago the Malians had discovered that the pass was in no way a good thing.

CCXVI. The course of the path is as follows: it begins at the river Asopus as it flows through the ravine, and this mountain and the path have the same name, Anopaea. This Anopaea stretches along the ridge of the mountain and ends at Alpenus, the Locrian city nearest to Malis, near the rock called Blackbuttock and the seats of the Cercopes, where it is narrowest.

CCXVII. This, then, was the nature of the pass. The Persians crossed the Asopus and travelled all night along this path, with the Oetaean mountains on their right and the Trachinian on their left. At dawn they came to the summit of the pass. In this part of the mountain one thousand armed men of the Phocians were on watch, as I have already shown, defending their own country and guarding the path. The lower pass was held by those I have mentioned, but the Phocians had voluntarily promised Leonidas to guard the path over the mountain.

CCXVIII. The Phocians learned in the following way that the Persians had climbed up: they had ascended without the Phocians' notice because the mountain was entirely covered with oak trees. Although there was no wind, a great noise arose like leaves being trodden underfoot. The Phocians jumped up and began to put on their weapons, and in a moment the barbarians were there. When they saw the men arming themselves, they were amazed, for they had supposed that no opposition would appear, but they had now met with an army. Hydarnes feared that the Phocians might be Lacedaemonians and asked Epialtes what country the army was from. When he had established what he wanted to know with certainty, he arrayed the Persians for battle. The Phocians, assailed by thick showers of arrows and supposing that the Persians had set out against them from the start, fled to the top of the mountain and prepared to meet their destruction. This is what they intended, but the Persians with Epialtes and Hydarnes paid no attention to the Phocians and went down the mountain as fast as possible.

CCXIX. The seer Megistias, examining the sacrifices, first told the Hellenes at Thermopylae that death was coming to them with the dawn. Then deserters came who announced the circuit made by the Persians. These gave their signals while it was still night; a third report came from the watchers running down from the heights at dawn. The Hellenes then took counsel, but their opinions were divided. Some advised not to leave their post, but others spoke against them. They eventually parted, some departing and dispersing each to their own cities, others preparing to remain there with Leonidas.

CCXX. It is said that Leonidas himself sent them away because he was concerned that they would be killed, but felt it not fitting for himself and the Spartans to desert that post which they had come to defend at the beginning. I, however, tend to believe that when Leonidas perceived that the allies were dispirited and unwilling to run all risks with him, he told them to depart. For himself, however, it was not good to leave; if he remained, he would leave a name of great fame, and the prosperity of Sparta would not be blotted out. When the Spartans asked the oracle about this war when it broke out, the Pythia had foretold that either Lacedaemon would be destroyed by the barbarians or their king would be killed. She gave them this answer in hexameter verses running as follows:

For you, inhabitants of wide-wayed Sparta,  
Either your great and glorious city must be wasted by Persian men,  
Or if not that, then the bound of Lacedaemon must mourn a dead king, from Heracles' line.  
The might of bulls or lions will not restrain him with opposing strength; for he has the might of Zeus.

I declare that he will not be restrained until he utterly tears apart one of these.

Considering this and wishing to win distinction for the Spartans alone, he sent away the allies rather than have them leave in disorder because of a difference of opinion.

CCXXI. Not the least proof I have of this is the fact that Leonidas publicly dismissed the seer who attended the expedition, for fear that he might die with them. This was Megistias the Acarnanian, said to be descended from Melampus, the one who told from the sacrifices what was going to happen to them. He was dismissed but did not leave; instead he sent away his only son who was also with the army.

CCXXII. Those allies who were dismissed went off in obedience to Leonidas, only the Thespians and Thebans remaining with the Lacedaemonians. The Thebans remained against their will and desire, for Leonidas kept them as hostages. The Thespians very gladly remained, saying they would not abandon Leonidas and those with him by leaving; instead they would stay and die with them. Their general was Demophilus son of Diadromes.

CCXXIII. Xerxes made libations at sunrise and waiting till about mid-morning, made his assault. Epialtes had advised this, for the descent from the mountain is more direct, and the way is much shorter than the circuit and ascent. Xerxes and his barbarians attacked, but Leonidas and his Hellenes, knowing they were going to their deaths, advanced now much farther than before into the wider part of the pass. In all the previous days they had sallied out into the narrow way and fought there, guarding the defensive wall. Now, however, they joined battle outside the narrows and many of the barbarians fell, for the leaders of the companies beat everyone with whips from behind, urging them ever forward. Many of them were pushed into the sea and drowned; far more were trampled alive by each other, with no regard for who perished. Since the Hellenes knew that they must die at the hands of those who had come around the mountain, they displayed the greatest strength they had against the barbarians, fighting recklessly and desperately.

CCXXIV. By this time most of them had had their spears broken and were killing the Persians with swords. Leonidas, proving himself extremely valiant, fell in that struggle and with him other famous Spartans, whose names I have learned by inquiry since they were worthy men. Indeed, I have learned by inquiry the names of all three hundred. Many famous Persians also fell there, including two sons of Darius, Abrocomes and Hyperanthes, born to Darius by Phratagune daughter of Artanes. Artanes was the brother of king Darius and son of Hystaspes son of Arsames. When he gave his daughter in marriage to Darius, he gave his whole house as dowry, since she was his only child.

CCXXV. Two brothers of Xerxes accordingly fought and fell there. There was a great struggle between the Persians and Lacedaemonians over Leonidas' body, until the Hellenes by their courageous prowess dragged it away and routed their enemies four times. The battle went on until the men with Epialtes arrived. When the Hellenes saw that they had come, the contest turned, for they retired to the narrow part of the way, passed behind the wall, and took their position crowded together on the hill, all except the Thebans. This hill is at the mouth of the pass, where the stone lion in honor of Leonidas now stands. In that place they defended themselves with swords, if they still had them, and with hands and teeth. The barbarians buried them with missiles, some attacking from the front and throwing down the defensive wall, others surrounding them on all sides.

CCXXVI. This then is how the Lacedaemonians and Thespians conducted themselves, but the Spartan Dieneces is said to have exhibited the greatest courage of all. They say that he made the following speech before they joined battle with the Medes: he had learned from a Trachinian that there were so many of the barbarians that when they shot their missiles, the sun was hidden by the

multitude of their arrows. He was not at all disturbed by this and made light of the multitude of the Medes, saying that their Trachinian foreigner brought them good news. If the Medes hid the sun, they could fight them in the shade instead of in the sun. This saying and others like it, they claim, Dieneses the Lacedaemonian left behind as a memorial.

CCXXVII. Next after him two Lacedaemonian brothers, Alpheus and Maron, sons of Orsiphantus, are said to have been most courageous. The Thespian who gained most renown was one whose name was Dithyrambus son of Harmatides.

CCXXVIII. There is an inscription written over these men, who were buried where they fell, and over those who died before the others went away, dismissed by Leonidas. It reads as follows:

Here four thousand from the Peloponnese once fought three million.

That inscription is for them all, but the Spartans have their own:

Foreigner, go tell the Spartans that we lie here obedient to their commands.

That one is to the Lacedaemonians, this one to the seer:

This is a monument to the renowned Megistias,  
Slain by the Medes who crossed the Spercheius river.  
The seer knew well his coming doom,  
But endured not to abandon the leaders of Sparta.

Except for the seer's inscription, the Amphictyons are the ones who honored them by erecting inscriptions and pillars. That of the seer Megistias was inscribed by Simonides son of Leoprepes because of his tie of guest-friendship with the man.

CCXXIX. It is said that two of these three hundred, Eurytus and Aristodemus, could have agreed with each other either to come home safely together to Sparta, since Leonidas had dismissed them from the camp and they were lying at Alpeni very sick of ophthalmia, or to die with the others, if they were unwilling to return home. They could have done either of these things, but they could not agree and had different intentions. When Eurytus learned of the Persians circuit, he demanded his armor and put it on, bidding his helot to lead him to the fighting. The helot led him there and fled, but he rushed into the fray and was killed. Aristodemus, however, lost his strength and stayed behind. Now if Aristodemus alone had been sick and returned to Sparta, or if they had both made the trip, I think the Spartans would not have been angry with them. When, however, one of them died, and the other had the same excuse but was unwilling to die, the Spartans had no choice but to display great anger towards Aristodemus.

CCXXX. Some say that Aristodemus came home safely to Sparta in this way and by this excuse. Others say that he had been sent out of the camp as a messenger and could have gotten back in time for the battle but chose not to, staying behind on the road and so surviving, while his fellow-messenger arrived at the battle and was killed.

CCXXXI. When Aristodemus returned to Lacedaemon, he was disgraced and without honor. He

was deprived of his honor in this way: no Spartan would give him fire or speak with him, and they taunted him by calling him Aristodemus the Trembler. In the battle at Plataea, however, he made up for all the blame brought against him.

CCXXXII. It is said that another of the three hundred survived because he was sent as a messenger to Thessaly. His name was Pantites. When he returned to Sparta, he was dishonored and hanged himself.

CCXXXIII. The Thebans, whose general was Leontiades, fought against the king's army as long as they were with the Hellenes and under compulsion. When, however, they saw the Persian side prevailing and the Hellenes with Leonidas hurrying toward the hill, they split off and approached the barbarians, holding out their hands. With the most truthful words ever spoken, they explained that they were Medizers, had been among the first to give earth and water to the king, had come to Thermopylae under constraint, and were guiltless of the harm done to the king. By this plea they saved their lives, and the Thessalians bore witness to their words. They were not, however, completely lucky. When the barbarians took hold of them as they approached, they killed some of them even as they drew near. Most of them were branded by Xerxes command with the king's marks, starting with the general Leontiades. His son Eurymachus long afterwards was murdered by the Plataeans when, as general of four hundred Thebans, he seized the town of Plataea.

CCXXXIV. This, then, is how the Greeks fought at Thermopylae. Xerxes then sent for Demaratus and questioned him, saying first, "Demaratus you are a good man. I hold that proven by the plain truth, for things have turned out no differently than you foretold. Now, tell me this: how many Lacedaemonians are left, and how many of them are warriors like these? or is it so with them all?" "My king," said Demaratus, "the number of the Lacedaemonians is great, and so too the number of their cities. But what you would like to know, I will tell you: there is in Lacedaemon a city called Sparta, a city of about eight thousand men, all of them equal to those who have fought here; the rest of the Lacedaemonians are not equal to these, yet they are valiant men." "And how, Demaratus," answered Xerxes, "can we overcome those men with the least trouble to ourselves? Come, disclose that to me, for you have been their king and know the plan and order of their counsels."

CCXXXV. "My king," Demaratus replied, "if you in sincerity ask my counsel, it is but right that I should point out to you the best way. It is this, namely that you should send three hundred ships of your fleet to the Laconian land. There is an island lying off their coasts called Cythera. Chilon, a man of much wisdom among us, says about it that it would be better for the Spartans if Cythera were beneath the sea rather than above it. This he said because he expected that it would provide an opportunity for attack just as I am suggesting--not that he had any foreknowledge of your force, but he dreaded all men's forces alike. Let them then make that island their station and set out from there to strike fear into the Lacedaemonians. If these have a war of their own on their borders, you will have no cause to fear that they will send men to save the rest of Hellas from being overrun by your armies; furthermore, the enslavement of the rest of Hellas must weaken Laconia if it is left to stand alone. If, however, you do not do this, then expect what I will now tell you: a narrow isthmus leads to the Peloponnese; all the Peloponnesians will be banded together there against you, and you may expect battles more stubborn than those that you have fought already. But if you do as I have said, then you may have that isthmus and all their cities without striking a blow."

CCXXXVI. Next spoke Achaemenes, Xerxes' brother and admiral of the fleet; it chanced that he was present during their conversation, and he feared that Xerxes would be persuaded to follow Demaratus' counsel. "O king," he said, "I see that you are listening to a man who is jealous of your good fortune or is perhaps even a traitor to your cause. These are the ways that are dear to the hearts of all Greeks: they are jealous of success and they hate power. No, if after the recent calamity which has wrecked four hundred of your ships you send away three hundred more from your fleet to sail round the Peloponnese, your enemies will be enough to do battle with you; while your fleet is united, however, it is invincible, and your enemies will not be so many as to be enough to fight; moreover, all your navy will be a help to your army and your army to your navy, both moving together. If you separate some of your fleet from yourself, you will be of no use to them, nor they to you. My counsel is rather that you make your own plans well, and take no account of the business of your adversaries, what battlefields they will choose, what they will do, and how many they are. They are able enough to think for themselves, and we similarly for ourselves. As for the Lacedaemonians, if they meet the Persians in the field, they will in no way repair their most recent losses."

CCXXXVII. "Achaemenes," Xerxes answered, "I think that you speak well, and I will do as you counsel. Despite the fact that your advice is better than his, Demaratus does say what he supposes to be most serviceable to me, for assuredly I will never believe that he is no friend to my cause. I believe this of him because of all that he has already said and by what is the truth, namely, that if one citizen prospers, another citizen is jealous of him and shows his enmity by silence, and no one, (except if he has attained the height of excellence; and such are seldom seen) if his own townsman asks for counsel, will give him what he thinks to be the best advice. If one stranger prospers, however, another stranger is beyond all men his well-wisher and will, if he is asked, impart to him the best counsel he has. It is for this reason that I bid you all to refrain from maligning Demaratus, seeing that he is a stranger and a friend."

CCXXXVIII. Having spoken in this way, Xerxes passed over the place where the dead lay and hearing that Leonidas had been king and general of the Lacedaemonians, he gave orders to cut off his head and impale it. It is plain to me by this piece of evidence among many others, that while Leonidas lived, king Xerxes was more incensed against him than against all others; otherwise he would never have dealt so outrageously with his dead body, for the Persians are beyond all men known in the habit of honoring valiant warriors. They, then, who received these orders did as I have said.