

# The Historian as Hero: Herodotus and the 300 at Thermopylae\*

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## I

AMONG THE MANY BRILLIANT NARRATIVES TO BE FOUND IN HERODOTUS'S *Histories*, that of the battle of Thermopylae is surely one of the most famous and most moving. Although scholars have hardly ever thought of Herodotus as a great military historian, he has managed nonetheless to infuse many of his battle narratives with a profound sense of excitement and pathos simultaneously. The narrative of Thermopylae follows a pattern familiar from Herodotus's other battle narratives and is, like so much in the first historian, modelled on Homer: the use of prophecy to give a sense of foreboding to the events; the movement between individuals and groups, with the narrator now taking the close-up view, now the panoramic; the concentration on individuals, and in particular on worthy or noteworthy actions during the heat of battle; and, finally, an interest in unusual or inexplicable events that occurred before, during, and after the battle. I say "modelled on Homer," but it is more accurate to say that Herodotus has retained some elements of Homeric battle narrative while doing other things in a very different way.<sup>1</sup>

\* This is a lightly revised version of my 2016 Presidential Address; I have added several additional references but kept the basic format of the talk. In an earlier incarnation it formed part of a larger paper that was given at Colgate University, Middlebury College, the University of Tennessee, and Western Kentucky University. I thank the audiences there for their comments and assistance. I am particularly grateful to Michael Flower, Laurel Fulkerson, Stephen Hodkinson, and Scarlett Kingsley for advice and criticism; they should not be assumed to agree with the views expressed here. The text of Herodotus used throughout is Wilson's OCT; translations are my own.

1. For Homeric battle narratives, see Mueller 2011, with further references; on Herodotus and war, see Tritle 2006; I hope to provide a full study of Herodotus's battle narratives in a forthcoming work.

One of his most marked differences from Homer, as scholars have long noted, is his use of the first-person pronoun throughout,<sup>2</sup> and it is from one of these that I begin. The remark I shall focus on is, so far as I can tell, unique, and it occurs in the course of Herodotus's narrative of the battle of Thermopylae, indeed at the point that may be thought to be the climax. Narrating the Spartans' last stand on the final day of the battle, when they move out into the more open space, after they realize that they are surrounded, but yet still wish to display great deeds of prowess, Herodotus says that they were killing great numbers now at close quarters, since their spears were broken and they were using their swords, and he continues (7.224.1–2):

καὶ Λεωνίδης τε ἐν τούτῳ τῷ πόνῳ πίπτει ἀνὴρ γενόμενος ἄριστος, καὶ ἕτεροι μετ' αὐτοῦ ὀνομαστοὶ Σπαρτητέων, τῶν ἐγὼ ὡς ἀνδρῶν ἀξίων γενομένων ἐπυθόμην τὰ οὐνόματα, ἐπυθόμην δὲ καὶ ἀπάντων τῶν τριακοσίων. καὶ δὴ Περσέων πίπτουσι ἐνθαῦτα ἄλλοι τε πολλοὶ καὶ ὀνομαστοί, ἐν δὲ δὴ καὶ Δαρείου δύο παῖδες Ἀβροκόμης τε καὶ Ὑπεράνθης, ἐκ τῆς Ἀρτάνεω θυγατρὸς Φραταγούνης γεγονότες Δαρεΐφ.

And in this struggle Leonidas falls, having proven himself a brave man, and with him other renowned Spartiates, whose names I have learned as those of men who deserve to be remembered, and I have learned in fact the names of all the three hundred. And of the Persians too there fall here many others, renowned men, among whom were two children of Darius, Habrocomes and Hyperanthes, borne to Darius by Phratagune, the daughter of Artanes.

Scholars have noted the apparent oddity of Herodotus remarking that he learned the names of the 300<sup>3</sup> but then failing to give those names, and indeed some have faulted him for not doing so.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is hard to see how such a list would have worked, for we have no parallel in Herodotus for a long string of personal names (which would presumably have included patronymics) without comment. When we think of “catalogues” in Herodotus, we think possibly of his account of the revenues of Darius where the various nations are listed, but something is also said about their contributions; or, perhaps more famously, the catalogue of Persian forces to be found in Book 7 as Xerxes

2. For the first-person in Herodotus, see Dewald 1987; Marincola 1987; de Jong 1999; Dewald 2002.

3. Ball 1976: 1 says that the 300 were likely to be the ἱππεῖς, the royal bodyguard.

4. See, e.g., Macan 1908: 1.331: “It is curious that he does not give any of their names in this place, though he goes on to name several Persian ὀνομαστοί.” Macan *ibid.* thinks the words καὶ ἕτεροι ... τριακοσίων may be a later insertion, but the location of this particular remark here may be suggestive: see below, n33.

is on the march, which likewise lists a great number of peoples, but also includes some description of the peoples themselves, especially the armament they carry.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to imagine that Herodotus would simply give a list of three hundred names with nothing else but the names. The point of the remark, therefore, seems not to be that he was intending to record the names for his audience.

Nor is this exactly the kind of remark, of which we have many examples in Herodotus, where the narrator employs an intentional silence and says that he knows something but will not tell, as he does, for example, when speaking of the Delphian who falsely cut Croesus's name from a dedication in order to please the Spartans;<sup>6</sup> or when he says that he will "deliberately forget" the name of the Samian who stole the wealth of Sataspes' eunuch.<sup>7</sup> In cases such as this, the whole point seems to be that the narrator calls attention to his deliberate withholding of information that he possesses, presumably because the perpetrators wanted the renown and Herodotus takes satisfaction and pleasure in denying it to them. It is, in this sense, a public punishment, a kind of *damnatio memoriae*. Yet in the case of the Thermopylae remark, it can hardly be the case that his withholding of the names means that he is trying to take glory away from the fighters there, especially as he makes clear that the whole reason he learned the names was because of their extraordinary bravery (ὡς ἀνδρῶν ἀξίω γενομένων ἐπυθόμην τὰ οὐνόματα). The remark also has nothing in common with Herodotus's professions, especially in Book 2, where he says that it is not "holy" for him to disclose the name of a god. In these his aim is to observe decorum in matters of secret religious rites, and thus propriety dictates his procedure.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the closest passage is 8.85.2–3,<sup>9</sup> also a battle narrative, where Herodotus says:

ἔχω μὲν νυν συχνῶν οὐνόματα τριηράρχων καταλέξει τῶν νέας Ἑλληνίδας ἐλόντων, χρήσομαι δὲ αὐτοῖσι οὐδὲν πλὴν Θεομήστορος τε τοῦ Ἄνδροδάμαντος καὶ Φυλάκου τοῦ Ἰστιαίου, Σαμίων ἀμφοτέρων. τοῦδε <δὲ> εἵνεκα μέμνημαι τούτων μούνων, ὅτι Θεομήστωρ μὲν διὰ τοῦτο τὸ ἔργον Σάμου ἐτυράννευσε καταστησάντων τῶν Περσέων, Φύλακος δὲ εὐεργέτης βασιλέος ἀνεγράφη καὶ χῶρη ἐδωρήθη πολλῇ.

5. Hdt. 3.89–96; 7.61–99; on the latter, see Armayor 1978.

6. Hdt. 1.51.4: τοῦ ἐπιστάμενος τὸ οὐνομα οὐκ ἐπιμνήσομαι.

7. Hdt. 4.43.7: τοῦ ἐπιστάμενος τὸ οὐνομα ἐκὼν ἐπιλήθομαι. For other examples of these kinds of intentional silence, see 1.193.4, 7.96.1.

8. See, e.g., Hdt. 2.46.2, 2.65.2, 2.86.1, 2.86.2, 2.132.2; see further Linforth 1924.

9. Ball 1975: 5 notes that Herodotus's remark concerning the 330 kings who followed Min and did nothing worthy of memory is also not to be compared with this passage.

I can list the names of many trierarchs who captured Greek ships, but I shall employ them in no way except for Theomestor, the son of Androdamas, and Phylacus, the son of Histiaeus, both Samians. I have mentioned these two alone for the following reasons: Theomestor, because of his action, became tyrant of Samos (the Persians establishing him in power), and Phylacus was inscribed as a benefactor of the King and was given a great amount of land.

This is yet a third type of intentional silence in Herodotus, whereby the profession of an inability to say something about someone or something is mainly offered as a way of highlighting particular people about whom Herodotus *does* have something to say. For example, just after this passage Herodotus remarks (8.87.1):

κατὰ μὲν δὴ τοὺς ἄλλους οὐκ ἔχω {μετεξετέρους} εἰπεῖν ἀτρεκέως ὡς ἕκαστοι τῶν βαρβάρων ἢ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἠγωνίζοντο· κατὰ δὲ Ἀρτεμισίην τάδε ἐγένετο, ἀπ' ὧν εὐδοκίμησε μᾶλλον ἔτι παρὰ βασιλεῖ.

Now as regards the rest, I cannot say with any accuracy how each of the barbarians or Greeks competed in battle; but in the case of Artemisia the following happened, from which still more did she enjoy good repute from the King.<sup>10</sup>

Herodotus then proceeds to spend a good deal of narrative space and time on Artemisia's exploits at Salamis, and it seems clear that the profession of an inability to say something about the other Greeks and barbarians is a way of calling attention to Artemisia herself.<sup>11</sup> Again, this is not what is going on at 7.224.

Perhaps rather than looking for parallels to that passage, we could take the simple and direct approach of Detlev Fehling. In accordance with his beliefs that virtually all of the source citations in Herodotus are fictive, he offers the opinion that despite what Herodotus says about learning the names of the 300 at Thermopylae, he in fact did no such thing:

I ... consider it the most foolish Romanticism for scholars to imagine Herodotus would have found it any less tiresome to get up all three hundred names than we would today. The sentence is simply a way of paying tribute to these men by implying that they would have been well worthy of having their names committed to memory.<sup>12</sup>

10. This passage is noted by Ball 1975: 5; he thinks it might be a reluctance on Herodotus's part "to expose the Ionians who had fought against the rest of the Greeks." It will be clear from my remarks that I see it as a narrative strategy.

11. Artemisia takes up a disproportionate amount of narrative space in Herodotus's narrative of Salamis, as Plutarch was to complain (*de Herodoti malignitate* 43).

12. Fehling 1989: 127 = 1971: 96 ("Ich glaube, daß es törichte Romantik ist, zu denken, Herodot hätte es weniger langweilig gefunden als wir an seiner Stelle, dreihundert Namen

To my knowledge no other scholar has joined Fehling in this opinion, and most, if not all, tend to take Herodotus at his word.

## II

The most common way<sup>13</sup> of explaining how Herodotus learned the names of the 300 is to connect his remark here with a passage in Pausanias which mentions a monument to the 300 in Sparta (3.14.1):

ἐκ δὲ τῆς ἀγορᾶς πρὸς ἥλιον ἰόντι δυόμενον τάφος κενὸς Βρασιδά τῷ Τέλλιδος πεποιήται· ἀπέχει δὲ οὐ πολὺ τοῦ τάφου τὸ θέατρον, λίθου λευκοῦ, θεᾶς ἄξιον. τοῦ θεάτρου δὲ ἀπαντικρὺ Πausανίου τοῦ Πλαταιαῖσιν ἠγησαμένου μνημᾶ ἐστὶ, τὸ δὲ ἕτερον Λεωνίδου (καὶ λόγους κατὰ ἔτος ἕκαστον ἐπ' αὐτοῖς λέγουσι καὶ τιθέασιν ἀγῶνα, ἐν ᾧ πλὴν Σπαρτιατῶν ἄλλω γε οὐκ ἔστιν ἀγωνίζεσθαι). τὰ δὲ ὅσα τῷ Λεωνίδου τεσσαράκοντα ἕτεσιν ὕστερον ἀνελομένου ἐκ Θερμοπυλῶν τοῦ Πausανίου. κείται δὲ καὶ στήλη πατρόθεν τὰ ὀνόματα ἔχουσα οἱ πρὸς Μήδους τὸν ἐν Θερμοπύλαις ἀγῶνα ὑπέμειναν.

From the agora going west one comes to a cenotaph constructed for Brasidas, the son of Tellis. Not much distant from this is the theater made of white stone and worthy of seeing. Opposite the theater is the tomb of Pausanias, the commander at Plataea, and the other is that of Leonidas. (Every year they make speeches at these tombs and hold a contest, in which it is not possible for anyone except the Spartiates to compete.) The bones of Leonidas were taken up from Thermopylae by Pausanias forty years after the battle. A stele is also set up there with the names and patronymics of those who endured the contest against the Medes in Thermopylae.

This monument, then, honoring Leonidas and the dead at Thermopylae is (in this interpretation) what lies behind Herodotus's remark at 7.224; Herodotus saw this stele, and it was thus that he learned the names of the 300.

For a number of reasons, I think this is unlikely. Let us leave aside for the moment the fact that what was in Sparta in Pausanias's day was not necessarily there in Herodotus's. This is obvious, and has often been noted. A first observation that one might make is that Herodotus himself does not refer to seeing any such monument, and for an author who is not shy about telling us what he saw, this is noteworthy. Herodotus is perfectly capable of saying, to take just a couple of examples, that he saw "Cadmean letters" on tripods in Boeotian Thebes or that he saw the hands of the statues of Mycerinus's

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zu memorieren. Der Satz ist nur eine Huldigung, die besagt, daß sie dessen wert wären"). At 1989: 127n3 (= 1971: 96n3) Fehling expresses astonishment with Hignett's suggestion (1963: 148n3) that Herodotus learned the names through oral tradition.

13. See, e.g., Stein 1889: 209–10; Macan 1908: 1.331; and How and Wells 1928: 2.230.

servants lying on the floor next to the statues.<sup>14</sup> I am well aware that scholars have noted that there are often problems with Herodotus's autopsy and accounts of inscriptions,<sup>15</sup> and while it is certainly important whether Herodotus gets particular things right, it is immaterial for my purposes here whether or not Herodotus's claims of autopsy are problematic. What is of importance is that Herodotus is not shy of *making* claims of autopsy, and it is not clear why, if he had in fact seen a monument listing the names of those who died at Thermopylae, he would not have said such a thing, particularly as he *does* mention the burial of the men on the battlefield and the inscription over that grave (7.228.1–4):

θαφθεῖσι δέ σφι αὐτοῦ ταύτη τῇ περ ἔπεσον καὶ τοῖσι πρότερον τελευτήσασιν ἢ <τοῦς> ὑπὸ Λεωνίδεω ἀποπεμφθέντας οἴχεσθαι, ἐπιγέγραπται γράμματα λέγοντα τάδε· “μυριάσιν ποτὲ τῆδε τριηκοσίαις ἐμάχοντο” .... ταῦτα μὲν δὴ τοῖσι πᾶσι ἐπιγέγραπται, τοῖσι δὲ Σπαρτιήτησι ἰδίῃ· “ὦ ξεῖν’, ἀγγέλλειν Λακεδαιμονίους” .... Λακεδαιμονιοῖσι μὲν δὴ τοῦτο, τῷ δὲ μάντι τόδε· “μνήμα τόδε κλειτοῖο Μεγιστία” .... ἐπιγράμμασι μὲν νυν καὶ στήλησι, ἕξω ἢ τὸ τοῦ μάντιος ἐπίγραμμα, Ἀμφικτύονές εἰσὶ σφεας οἱ ἐπικοσμήσαντες· τὸ δὲ τοῦ μάντιος Μεγιστίω Σιμωνίδης ὁ Λεωπρέπεός ἐστι κατὰ ξεινίην ὁ ἐπιγράψας.

Over those who were buried there in that very place where they fell and over those who died before the men dismissed by Leonidas had departed is this inscription: “Once here against 300,000 fought ....” This is for the whole force, while there is a special one for the Lacedaemonians: “Stranger, tell the Lacedaemonians ....” That is for the Lacedaemonians, while for the seer there is the following: “This is the monument of famous Megistias ....” The Amphictyons were the ones who honored them with these inscriptions except for the epitaph for the seer. Simonides, the son of Leoprepes, is the one who composed the inscription for the seer Megistias, on account of their friendship.

Although Herodotus does not claim autopsy of this monument, he nonetheless writes of it in such a way that the reader is meant to infer easily that he has seen it. And indeed this would have been the ideal place to say that there was also a commemorative monument for the men in Sparta itself which listed the names and patronymics of the men who fought and died at Thermopylae. But of course he does not.

Let us look now a little closer at the passage of Pausanias describing this monument. It is important here to separate out Pausanias's surrounding ex-

14. For statements of autopsy see, e.g., 2.12.1, 2.29.1, 2.131.3 (Mycerinus's servants), 2.143.3, 2.148.1, 3.12.4, 5.59 (Cadmaean letters), 6.47.1.

15. On the problems surrounding Herodotus's claims of autopsy, see Fehling 1989 *passim*; West 1985.

planatory narrative from the description of the monument itself; for even if Pausanias is wrong about the details of how the monument came to be, that does not necessarily mean that the monument itself was not there. It has been observed that the figure “forty years” is problematic, since if Pausanias means by “Pausanias” here the Spartan regent who won the battle at Plataea, then the figure “forty years” cannot stand, since the Plataean Pausanias, shortly after the battle, was accused of medism, brought back to Sparta, starved in the temple of the Brazen Goddess, brought out before he died and then buried at the entrance to the precinct—all of which is told by Thucydides in his digression on Pausanias and Themistocles in his first book (1.128.3–134). So the Plataean Pausanias could not have been around forty years later to bring the body of Leonidas back to Sparta. It has been suggested that the Pausanias referred to here is the son of Pleistoanax and grandson of the Pausanias who commanded at Plataea, but this Pausanias was still a minor in 427, so this action in approximately 440 is not likely to have been his—quite apart from the fact that given the context of the narrative here, it would be very odd indeed if the periegete were not referring to the hero of the Persian Wars, since he has just mentioned him in a Persian-War context.<sup>16</sup> The notion that we are to think of a *different* Pausanias right after mention of the famous one strains credulity. Indeed, it almost certainly must be the Plataean Pausanias, especially as already in Herodotus Pausanias is portrayed as having avenged the death of Leonidas and the men at Thermopylae: Pausanias says so in his reply to the Aeginetan who suggests that he mutilate the body of Leonidas,<sup>17</sup> and Herodotus himself calls the victory at Plataea “the fairest victory of all those we know,” precisely because Pausanias there avenged the death of Leonidas at Thermopylae.<sup>18</sup>

Our way might be helped in this if we had better information about Spartan burial and commemorative practices in the fifth-century B.C.E., but the evidence is sparse and difficult to contextualize. Spartan kings, of course, received a magnificent burial, described in detail by Herodotus (6.58.2–3), but

16. Connor 1979: 22–23 points out that Pausanias is usually careful to distinguish homonymous individuals, and notes as well the passage right after this, 3.5.1, where he does so.

17. Hdt. 9.79 with Low 2011: 11.

18. Hdt. 9.64.1 with Flower and Marincola 2002 ad loc. For some, the solution lies in emending the text from “forty years” to “four years.” Against this suggestion see Ball 1976: 7n7. Connor 1979: 23–24 has a good discussion of the problems with the text and ultimately maintains “forty,” though only at the cost of having to assume that the τοῦ of the phrase τοῦ ... ἀνελομένου was a patronymic and that the name of a son of Pausanias has dropped out. But the close connection of Leonidas and the Plataean Pausanias would argue against this.

for commoners, and even for military leaders, the evidence seems to suggest that Spartiate graves were modest and that all soldiers were treated the same, without differentiation (or much differentiation) of rank.<sup>19</sup> All our evidence suggests that Spartan soldiers were buried at the site of the battle where they died (or in the closest friendly territory), and that is what Herodotus says happened at both Thermopylae and Plataea.<sup>20</sup> So what would have stood at Sparta, even in Herodotus's time, would not have been a grave but a memorial. It certainly makes sense that the Spartans might have sought, at a later date, to retrieve the body of their king, Leonidas, given the importance they placed on the king's body. Where Pausanias places the tomb is noteworthy, however, because it would mean that he was not buried in the usual place for Agiad kings, near Pitana, though this exception might be chalked up, of course, to Leonidas's outstanding service at Thermopylae.<sup>21</sup>

There is no archaeological evidence for commemoration of the battle either at Thermopylae itself or at Sparta,<sup>22</sup> so we are thrown back onto literary sources. But even these paint an incomplete picture. Pausanias mentions the contests that are held at the graves of Pausanias and Leonidas, and this may be analogous to the remembrance of the Battle of the Champions (also 300 in number) at the Gymnopaïdiai festival;<sup>23</sup> yet while there is no reason to doubt that this was true in Pausanias's time, his text can tell us little about the fifth-century situation in Sparta. It has been suggested that the famous verses of Simonides on Thermopylae, which commemorate the exceptional bravery of the Spartans, may have been recited or sung in a commemoration of the men at Sparta itself. The reference in Simonides to this "sepulchre" (σηκόρ) implies a shrine dedicated to the dead, and perhaps this could be connected with the monument that Pausanias mentions.<sup>24</sup> This is, alas, not much to go on, and seems at odds with the usual attitude towards burial and

19. On Spartan funerary and burial practices see Cartledge 1987: 331–43; Nafissi 1991: 277–341; Hodkinson 2000: 237–70; Low 2006; and Low 2011. According to Plutarch (*Lyc.* 27.1–2, *Mor.* 238D), Lycurgus forbade inscriptions on μνημεῖα (the word can mean "tombs" or "monuments") except for a man who died in war (and for a woman of some status, but what status is very much debated). For the simple Spartan monuments that contain merely a name and the phrase ἐν (or ἐμ) πολέμῳ, see Hodkinson 2000: 250–52; Low 2004: 85–91.

20. Hdt. 7.228.1; 9.85; cf. Pritchett 1985: 94–259 for the evidence, and 241–46 for Sparta in particular.

21. Low 2006: 8–9.

22. Low 2006: 105n43; cf. Clairmont 1983: 114–16.

23. Hodkinson 2000: 257.

24. Bowra 1933; Flower 1998: 369.



remembrance at Sparta in the fifth century. I am inclined to agree with Polly Low who thinks the stele was a much later construction, probably of the Roman era, when there was great interest in the Persian Wars.<sup>25</sup> This does not by any means rule out a contemporary commemoration of the men who died at Thermopylae, perhaps even with their names recited and preserved in oral tradition, but it does mean that Herodotus does not want us to imagine him as having learned these names by consultation of some written list.<sup>26</sup>

### III

Since the material evidence is inconclusive, I wonder if perhaps some light on this issue can come from Herodotus's own text and in particular from his post-battle narrative. For in keeping with his usual manner, Herodotus reserves for after the narrative of the battle itself a discussion of alternate versions or unusual occurrences. This is familiar from accounts elsewhere, as, for example, after the battle of Marathon where Herodotus notes the inexplicable blindness of Epizelus (6.117); or after the narrative of Salamis, where he tells the story of Adeimantus, the Corinthian general, fleeing at the outset of the battle, but chastised by a mysterious boat and voice (8.94).

In the Thermopylae narrative, right after the passage just quoted and before Herodotus tells us of Xerxes' trip over the battlefield and his decapitation and impalement of the head of Leonidas, Herodotus offers some alternate accounts of three individuals from the 300 who had been with Leonidas at Thermopylae. In the first story, Herodotus tells us that two of the men, Eurytus and Aristodemus, were said to have been excused from the battle on account of inflammation of the eyes. While recuperating in a neighboring town, Eurytus heard that the battle had begun and ordering his helot to help him don his armor, he rushed back into the battle, where he died fighting. Aristodemus, however, did no such thing, and returned to Sparta having saved his skin. Herodotus continues (7.229.2–231):

25. Low 2011: 6; for Persian-Wars interest during the Roman era, see Spawforth 1994; Alcock 2002: 74–86; Spawforth 2012: 103–41.

26. I should add, for what it is worth, that I do not see the commemoration of Thermopylae as some sort of counterweight to the Athenian exaltation of Salamis. It was, after all, a defeat, and would have been poor evidence for Spartans as leaders and liberators of Greece: much better and much more in tune with the issues at stake in the Peloponnesian War would have been to honor the men at Plataea, Herodotus's "fairest" victory that drove the Persians from Greece, and which even Aeschylus (*Pers.* 817–18) had to admit was a Spartan victory (Δωρίδος λόγχης ὕπο) of enormous proportions (θῖνες νεκρῶν); cf. also Thuc. 3.58.5 where the Plataeans remind the Spartans that Plataea was the battle that "liberated" Greece (γῆν ἐν ἧ ἠλεθερώθησαν οἱ Ἕλληνες).

εἰ μὲν νυν <συνέβη> ἢ μόνον Ἀριστόδημον ἀλγήσαντα ἀπονοστήσαι ἐς Σπάρτην ἢ καὶ ὁμοῦ σφῶν ἀμφοτέρων τὴν κομιδὴν γενέσθαι, δοκεῖν ἐμοὶ οὐκ ἄν σφι Σπαρτίτας μὴνιν οὐδεμίαν προσθέσθαι· νῦν δὲ τοῦ μὲν αὐτῶν ἀπολομένου, τοῦ δὲ τῆς μὲν αὐτῆς ἐχομένου προφάσιος, οὐκ ἐθελήσαντος δὲ ἀποθνήσκειν, ἀναγκαίως σφι ἔχειν μνηῖσαι μεγάλως Ἀριστοδήμῳ. οἱ μὲν νυν οὕτω σωθῆναι λέγουσι Ἀριστόδημον ἐς Σπάρτην καὶ διὰ πρόφασιν τοιήνδε, οἱ δὲ ἄγγελον πεμφθέντα ἐκ τοῦ στρατοπέδου, ἐξέον αὐτῷ καταλαβεῖν τὴν μάχην γινόμενην οὐκ ἐθελῆσαι, ἀλλ' ὑπομείναντα ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ περιγενέσθαι, τὸν δὲ συνάγγελον αὐτοῦ ἀπικόμενον ἐς τὴν μάχην ἀποθανεῖν. ἀπονοστήσας δὲ ἐς Λακεδαίμονα ὁ Ἀριστόδημος ὄνειδός τε εἶχε καὶ ἀτιμίην· πάσχων δὲ τοιάδε ἡτίμωτο· οὔτε οἱ πῦρ οὐδεὶς ἔναυε Σπαρτιητέων οὔτε διελέγετο, ὄνειδός τε εἶχε ὁ τρέσας Ἀριστόδημος καλούμενος. ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἐν τῇ ἐν Πλαταιῆσι μάχῃ ἀνέλαβε πᾶσαν τὴν ἐπενειχθεῖσάν <οἱ> αἰτίην.

Now if it had happened that only Aristodemus was ill and returned to Sparta, or that both together had made the journey, I do not think the Spartans would have brought such anger to bear; but seeing that one of them had died and the other, although he had the same excuse, was unwilling to die, it was necessary that the Spartans would be so greatly enraged with Leonidas. Now although some say that Aristodemus returned in safety to Sparta in this way, others say that he had been sent as a messenger from the army, and that although he could have returned in time for the battle, he refused and instead delayed on the road and thus survived; while his fellow messenger returned to the battle and died. When Aristodemus returned to Lacedaemon, reproach and dishonor held him, and these were manifested in the following way: no one of the Spartiates would give him fire, or speak with him, while his reproach was to be called the “trembler” Aristodemus. But at the battle of Plataea he made up for every charge that had been brought against him.

The forward reference to Plataea reminds us that Herodotus not only states that Aristodemus was at Plataea but also that, in Herodotus’s opinion at least, Aristodemus showed by far the greatest bravery among the Spartans in that battle, even if the Spartans themselves thought otherwise.<sup>27</sup>

Herodotus has another post-battle variant version to record, this one concerning another Spartan, Pantites. It is said that Pantites was sent into Thessaly with a message, and thereby missed the battle. On his return to Sparta, Herodotus tells us, he found himself in such disgrace that he hanged himself (7.232).

Now even if we accept that Eurytus returned to the battle and perished there, that leaves two of the 300, Aristodemus and Pantites, who—at least in

27. See Hdt. 9.71.2–3 with Flower and Marincola 2002 ad loc.

some versions that Herodotus heard—were not there. Later in Book 9, when describing Aristodemus’s fighting at Plataea Herodotus refers to him with the words *ὁς ἐκ Θερμοπυλῶν μόνος τῶν τριηκοσίων σωθείς*, “the sole survivor of the Three Hundred from Thermopylae” (9.71.2), which suggests either that Herodotus did not accept the account of Pantites that he narrated or that he forgot, when writing his account of Plataea, that one other of the 300 may also have been a survivor of the battle.<sup>28</sup>

Now there is nothing surprising in all of this for those who are familiar with Herodotus; nothing here seems at all unusual in his method or approach. Tell the story, then give alternates. This is exactly the kind of thing that aroused Plutarch’s ire half a millennium later, where he accuses Herodotus of giving with one hand and taking away with the other. For us, however, it is very much the approach that we would expect from someone who made it his aim to discover, record, and synthesize the oral traditions that existed about the great achievement of the Greeks against the Persians. That there would have been controversy and uncertainty when Herodotus was gathering his information is exactly what we would have expected, and his inability to reconcile diverging traditions led him to see an important part of his task as recording those traditions, and making sure that they did not perish. This is not to say, of course, that Herodotus *only* recorded traditions: in quite a number of places he has his own ideas and expresses his own conclusions, as when, in one of his more famous pronouncements, he rejects the variant version that made Onetes and Corydallus rather than Epialtes the betrayer of the pass at Thermopylae, and states, in the most emphatic way he can, that this variant version “is entirely unconvincing,” and as for Epialtes, “I put this one on record as guilty.”<sup>29</sup> So it is not to say that Herodotus is somehow a prisoner of the traditions he heard. But it is to say that the world in which Herodotus works is a world in which *ἱστορίη* is practiced on living people and participants, with all the prejudices and limitations that they have.

The significance of this for the supposed monument at Sparta is this: it is hard to avoid the conclusion that had there been a monument at Sparta of the sort that Pausanias describes, with the names and patronymics of the 300 who had “undergone the struggle” at Thermopylae, and had Herodotus seen it, it would have been a simple matter for him to reject or accept these individual alternate accounts. Had Pantites’ name appeared there, Herodotus

28. I suppose that one could argue that because Pantites was said to have committed suicide in disgrace, he could not really be considered a “survivor” of the battle, but this seems to me a very modern way to take it.

29. Hdt. 7.214.3: τοῦτον αἴτιον γράφω, one of the very few times he uses the verb.

could have been certain that the alternate version was not true, for Pantites would then have clearly been described as “having undergone the struggle.” And the same is true in a different way for Aristodemus: if his name had been on the monument at Sparta, then the stories of his failure to appear and his subsequent dishonor could have easily been dismissed as untrue. Conversely, if his name was not on the monument, then he could not be one of the 300 at Thermopylae who had “undergone the struggle”—and Herodotus is insistent that there were 300 men from the battle of Thermopylae whose names he learned. And yet Herodotus is not being inconsistent: for he nowhere says that 300 Spartiates *died* at Thermopylae; he says that 300 were present with Leonidas at Thermopylae, and he specifically notes Eurytus, Aristodemus, and Pantites as being of those 300.

It seems to me inconceivable that Herodotus, who can elsewhere use inscriptions and monuments to confirm or deny elements in a story, would have failed to note one way or the other the men whom the Spartans themselves had memorialized in Sparta on a public monument as having fought with Leonidas. Yet he could not verify the truth or falsity of the variant versions because there was no monument at Sparta in his time which he could have used as an “official” record.<sup>30</sup>

#### IV

So let us look one final time at what Herodotus says and see whether we can come up with a plausible understanding of why he makes the remark that he does at 7.224.1:

καὶ Λεωνίδης τε ἐν τούτῳ τῷ πόνῳ πίπτει ἀνὴρ γενόμενος ἄριστος, καὶ ἕτεροι μετ’ αὐτοῦ ὀνομαστοὶ Σπαρτητέων, τῶν ἐγὼ ὡς ἀνδρῶν ἀξίων γενομένων ἐπυθόμην τὰ οὐνόματα, ἐπυθόμην δὲ καὶ ἀπάντων τῶν τρηκοσίω.

The key lies, I think, in the way that Herodotus expresses himself: he does not say “I know” or “I saw” or “I have heard,” all common expressions in his work, but rather uses another favorite word, πυνθάνομαι, to learn by inquiry, and he uses it twice: what he actually says is “I learned by inquiry the names of all three hundred.”<sup>31</sup> Given that he does not subsequently record for us their names, the remark is not meant to be, in the end, so much about the men who fought and died at Thermopylae; it is meant rather to tell us something

30. The further conclusion is that the canonical number 300 for the *dead* at Thermopylae cannot have existed when Herodotus was writing and must be a later invention.

31. Ball 1976:4 already noted the importance of Herodotus’s use of this verb for any interpretation of the passage.

of the historian who has recorded the events. In other passages Herodotus is not reluctant to tell us the reasons he made this or that inquiry: he went to Tyre and learned (πυνθανόμενος, 2.44.1) that there was a temple there to the Phoenician Heracles; he learned (ὡς ... πυνθάνομαι) about Salmoxis and his secret chamber from those Greeks who dwell in the Hellespont and the Pontus (4.95.1); he was unable to learn (πυθέσθαι) exactly who really took Mardonius's body away after Plataea (9.84.2). In the Thermopylae passage, by contrast, his motivation for inquiry is the achievement of the men themselves: "I learned the names of all three hundred, on the ground that they proved themselves worthy men."

If we put aside notions of a monument seen by Herodotus, a different picture, perhaps only hinted at in the variant versions of the three men mentioned after the battle, begins to emerge. By emphasizing inquiry via πυνθάνομαι, Herodotus is putting the spotlight on his own activity as a historian, as a man committed to inquiry despite all the difficulties, troubles, and expense that such activity constituted in the ancient world. If his work is the record of actual inquiries made—and I see no reason not to believe that it is—then it would have consumed his efforts for many, many years. He was trying to recount the events of forty and fifty years before, without any of the tools which we have today by which we keep some form of the past alive. But as always in his narratives, he was concerned not just with anything that happened in the past, but with the extraordinary achievement of the Greeks, in this case the Spartans, and their victory in the face of enormous odds. *How* they behaved, *how* they comported themselves when faced with almost certain destruction is what holds his—and by extension our—attention. Why did they not flee, even when death was near? How could men bring themselves to endure what was certain death? Herodotus gives us an answer, or rather two answers. The first comes in the famous exchange between Xerxes and the exiled Spartan king Demaratus, in which the latter explains to Xerxes how it is that so few men will contend with so many (7.104.4–5):

ὦς δὲ καὶ Λακεδαιμόνιοι κατὰ μὲν ἓνα μαχόμενοι οὐδαμῶν εἰσι κακίονες ἀνδρῶν, ἀλέες δὲ ἄριστοι ἀνδρῶν ἀπάντων. ἐλεύθεροι γὰρ ἔόντες οὐ πάντα ἐλεύθεροί εἰσι· ἔπεστι γάρ σφι δεσπότης νόμος, τὸν ὑπερδαιμίνουσι πολλῶ ἔτι μᾶλλον ἢ οἱ σοὶ σέ. ποιεῦσι γὼν τὰ ἄν ἐκείνος ἀνώγει· ἀνώγει δὲ τῷτὸ αἰεὶ, οὐκ ἔων φεύγειν οὐδὲν πλῆθος ἀνθρώπων ἐκ μάχης, ἀλλὰ μένοντας ἐν τῇ τάξιν ἐπικρατέειν ἢ ἀπόλλυσθαι.

Likewise the Lacedaemonians, fighting one by one, are inferior to none, but fighting together they are the best of all. Being free, they are not entirely free. For the ruler who stands over them is *nomos*, which they fear much more than

your subjects fear you. For they do, you see, whatever that one commands, and it always commands the same, forbidding them to retreat before any multitude of men, demanding instead that they remain in formation, and so conquer or perish.

There is the effect of custom, a little ethnography of the Spartans, if you will. The second answer is somewhat differently focused. When on the morning of the battle, the omens proved unfavorable, Herodotus notes that the allied contingents serving with Leonidas and the Spartans were minded to flee (7.220.1–3):

λέγεται δὲ <καὶ> ὡς αὐτός σφεας ἀπέπεμψε Λεωνίδης, μὴ ἀπόλωνται κηδόμενος· αὐτῷ δὲ καὶ Σπαρτιητέων τοῖσι παρεούσι οὐκ ἔχειν εὐπρεπέως ἐκλιπεῖν τὴν τάξιν ἐς τὴν ἦλθον φυλάζοντες ἀρχήν. ταύτη καὶ μᾶλλον τὴν γνώμην πλείστος εἶμι, Λεωνίδην, ἐπιτε ἤσθητο τοὺς συμμάχους ἔοντας ἀπροθύμους καὶ οὐκ ἐθέλοντας συνδιακινδυνεύειν, κελεῦσαί σφεας ἀπαλλάσσεσθαι, αὐτῷ δὲ ἀπιέναι οὐ καλῶς ἔχειν· μένοντι δὲ αὐτοῦ κλέος μέγα ἐλείπετο, καὶ ἡ Σπάρτης εὐδαιμονίη οὐκ ἐξηλείφετο. ἐκέχρηστο γὰρ ὑπὸ τῆς Πυθίης τοῖσι Σπαρτιήτησι χρωμένοισι περὶ τοῦ πολέμου τούτου αὐτίκα κατ' ἀρχὰς ἐγειρομένου, ἢ Λακεδαίμονα ἀνάστατον γενέσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν βαρβάρων ἢ τὸν βασιλέα σφεων ἀπολέσθαι. ... ταῦτα τε δὴ ἐπιλεγόμενον Λεωνίδην καὶ βουλόμενον κλέος καταθέσθαι μόνων Σπαρτιητέων, ἀποπέμψαι τοὺς συμμάχους <δοκέω> μᾶλλον ἢ γνώμη διενειχθέντας οὕτως ἀκόσμως οἴχεσθαι τοὺς οἰχομένους.

It is said also that Leonidas himself dismissed them, concerned that they not perish; but for himself and the Spartiates present it would have been unseemly to abandon the position which they had come to guard from the beginning. I am entirely of the opinion that Leonidas, when he perceived that his allies were lacking heart and were unwilling to undergo the risk, ordered them to depart, but thought it unfitting for himself to do so. And by remaining he left behind great fame for himself, and the prosperity of Sparta was not erased. For it had been prophesied to the Spartiates by the Pythia when they consulted the oracle about this war when it was just breaking out, that either Lacedaemon would be destroyed by the barbarians or that their king would die. ... I think that Leonidas, in consideration of this, and wishing to leave behind fame for the Spartiates alone, dismissed the allies, rather than that those men departed in so unseemly a way because they had a difference of opinion.

This analysis reveals a great deal about Herodotus and what he saw as historical motivation: a reliance on the gods, and a desire for glory. Rather a far cry from what later historians, and from what we ourselves, consider acceptable historical motivations.

But the desire for glory may in fact be the key for understanding Herodotus's remark that he has learned the names of all 300 men who fought at

Thermopylae. It *may* be nothing more than a way of saying “what brave men they were!” But I doubt it, and, unlike Fehling, I don’t think you have to be a ‘romantic’ to doubt it. Rather, I would suggest, it presents the historian doing for an entire group what he does for individuals throughout his history: as representing and re-presenting the extraordinary bravery and sacrifice made by the Spartans on the battlefield. We are not to imagine Herodotus going to Sparta or anywhere else, and learning names from a stationary monument, simply reading over what was written there. Nothing of the sort. He would have found those names—or he wants us to see him as having found those names—in the oral traditions that survived after the event. The men’s names lived on in the mouths of others, others whom Herodotus met and interviewed over the years he was composing his history.<sup>32</sup> Put simply, for an extraordinary *historical* achievement—the singular bravery of the Spartans at Thermopylae—Herodotus performs an equally extraordinary *historiographical* achievement: the discovery, by trial and error, and by his own extensive travels and inquiries, of all of their names, all three hundred, with the attendant effort that such an action entailed.<sup>33</sup> In this way Herodotus too becomes a hero, his own role an *hommage* to those heroes of 480.

✱

A short coda. I must here borrow a page from that most pedantic of ancient historians, Polybius, and move from narrative mode into explanatory mode. As most of you know, Polybius is fond of narrating a set of events and then explaining to his audience what lessons they should take from the event.<sup>34</sup> His decidedly non-post-modern way of closing down meaning, in violation of everything we know about literature, is just one of the many things that makes Polybius so delightful.

I had been thinking about this passage in Herodotus on and off for some years, and I decided to present it now as my presidential address because it seemed to me to offer a useful perspective on what it is that we as Classicists do or hope to do. Herodotus faced many challenges in his life, I am sure, but

32. It has been suggested that the names of the men at Thermopylae survived in oral tradition perhaps to be recited in their entirety at those moments of commemoration mentioned above. I doubt that this was the case, at least in Herodotus’s time, for the same reason that if it existed, he could have used this likewise to determine the falsity of the variant versions that he reports.

33. This would explain why Herodotus makes his claim precisely at the climax of the passage, the mention of Leonidas’s death, for it is in this way that the historical characters and the historical narrator became most clearly united.

34. For this aspect of Polybius’s history, see Marincola 2001: 124–26.

he was spared the administrative and technocratic machinery that has been built up over the last few decades around the simple pleasure of learning. Aristotle may be right that all people by nature desire to know, but these days that desire is easily diminished or extinguished in the rush to test and certify, to quantify, and, of course and above all, to explain the tangible benefits that will come from this or that particular knowledge. We in the humanities face a consistent and pressing need to justify our work, although this is not only the case these days for the humanities. So it seemed to me appropriate on this festive occasion at which we acknowledge the great achievements of our colleagues in teaching, scholarship, and service, to remember and celebrate how great the pleasures of “useless” knowledge can be. Fehling thought it would be “tiresome” for Herodotus and us to go about learning these names, but how could a scholar say something like this? Much better, and much closer to the truth for most of us, is Housman:

In Germany at Easter time they hide coloured eggs about the house and the garden that the children may amuse themselves in hunting after them and finding them. It is to some such game of hide-and-seek that we are invited by that power which planted in us the desire to find out what is concealed, and stored the universe with hidden things that we might delight ourselves in discovering them. And the pleasure of discovery differs from other pleasures in this, that it is shadowed by no fear of satiety on the one hand or of frustration on the other. Other desires perish in their gratification, but the desire of knowledge never: the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing.<sup>35</sup>

So we must not be cowed or coerced by any administrative power into abandoning what we treasure so dearly, the production of new knowledge and its dissemination to our colleagues and students. I certainly think that some of the members of our profession can be considered heroes, those people who continue to teach and study the classical world under conditions of employment that bring them scant benefit or reward. All of us, however, can perhaps, like Herodotus, try to be heroic by energetically and enthusiastically pursuing knowledge where our interests take us, and by defending our own and future generations’ right to this pursuit. All knowledge is “useful,” our own no less than that of other scholars; which is why we can celebrate the effort of Herodotus and proudly follow in the footsteps of a man who expended enormous time, energy, and resources just to learn the names of a bunch of long-haired weirdos who died in a losing cause.

35. Housman 1892: 21–22.



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