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MARDONIUS' SENSELESS GREEKS*

In Herodotus' royal council scene, where Xerxes decides whether or not to punish the Greeks, the king's cousin and adviser Mardonius is made to say these famous lines (Hdt. 7.9β.1):

καίτοι [γε] ἐώθασι Ἕλληνες, ὡς πυνθάνομαι, ἀβουλότατα πολέμους ἴστασθαι ὑπό τε ἀγνωμοσύνης καὶ σκαιότητος. ἐπεὰν γὰρ ἀλλήλοισι πόλεμον προείπωσι, ἐξευρόντες τὸ κάλλιστον χωρίον καὶ λειότατον, ἐς τοῦτο κατιόντες μάχονται, ὥστε σὺν κακῷ μεγάλῳ οἱ νικῶντες ἀπαλλάσσονται· περὶ δὲ τῶν ἐσσουμένων οὐδὲ λέγω ἀρχήν, ἐξώλεες γὰρ δὴ γίνονται.

Yet, the Greeks do wage war, I hear, and they do so senselessly, in their poor judgement and stupidity. When they have declared war against each other, they find the finest, flattest piece of land and go down there and fight, so that the victors come off with terrible loss—I will not even begin to speak of the defeated, for they are utterly destroyed.

This passage has long been one of the pillars of the 'orthodox' view of Greek warfare.[1] It appears to describe a very peculiar way of war, in which conflicts were resolved by single battles at prearranged times, fought on open ground where neither side had an advantage. Fairness counted for more than tactical skill; all conditions were made equal, so that the winners could truly claim to be the braver and stronger men. The result, as Mardonius stressed, was needlessly bloody—but it was quintessentially Greek. Modern authors have argued that this 'agonistic' style of fighting, this

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[1] See for example G.B. Grundy, *Thucydides and the History of his Age* (London, 1911), 251; M. Detienne, 'La phalange: problèmes et controverses', in J.-P. Vernant (ed.), *Problèmes de la Guerre en Grèce Ancienne* (Paris, 1968), 119–42, at 124; J.K. Anderson, *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1970), 1; R. Lonis, *Guerre et Religion en Grèce a l'Époque Classique* (Paris, 1979), 15; P. Ducrey, *Guerre et Guerrier dans la Grèce Antique* (Paris, 1985), 64; W.R. Connor, 'Early Greek land warfare as symbolic expression', *Past and Present* 119 (1988), 3–29, at 18; V.D. Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (New York, 1989), 9–10; J.F. Lazenby, 'The killing zone', in V.D. Hanson (ed.), *Hoplites: The Classical Greek Battle Experience* (New York, 1991), 87–109, at 88; D. Dawson, *The Origins of Western Warfare: Militarism and Morality in the Ancient World* (Boulder, CO, 1996), 47–8; S. Mitchell, 'Hoplite warfare in ancient Greece', in A. Lloyd (ed.), *Battle in Antiquity* (London, 1996), 87–105, at 91; M.M. Sage, *Warfare in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook* (London, 1996), 73–4; J.E. Lendon, *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* (London, 2005), 42; V.D. Hanson, 'The hoplite narrative', in D. Kagan and G.F. Viggiano (edd.), *Men of Bronze: Hoplite Warfare in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, 2013), 256–75, at 269.

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'wonderful, absurd conspiracy' of open hoplite battle,[2] determined the shape of Greek warfare until the long and hard-fought Peloponnesian War changed the rules.[3]

In the works of Demosthenes (9.47-51) and Polybius (13.3.2-8) we find other passages suggesting that this kind of limited warfare indeed existed at some point. Crucially, however, these are both cases of later authors explicitly lamenting the loss of the supposed virtues of old. Their words have therefore been dismissed in recent scholarship as the nostalgic and moralizing rhetoric of Panhellenists and demagogues, and deemed unreliable as real descriptions of warfare in the Late Archaic period.[4] Mardonius' speech is clearly a very different creature; it is the product of a fifth-century writer to whose audience the scathing words must have made some sort of sense. Since it is the only assessment of this kind to be written anywhere near the time it is meant to describe, the notion of Greek warfare 'by the rules' may now be said to rest largely on its sole authority. As Wheeler put it, 'the agonal aspect of battle could be dismissed as a fourth-century Panhellenic fantasy, if not for Herodotus (7.9b.1-2).'[5]

However, we have good reason to doubt Mardonius' words. Historians and Herodotean scholars have each found separate grounds for scepticism, and over time different readings of the speech have emerged. In what follows I will rehearse only briefly the well-known ways in which Mardonius is wrong; the main point here is to try to combine the analyses of both military historians and scholars of the text to explain why exactly he is made to say these particular lines. Only then will we be able to assess the value of the passage as a characterization of Late Archaic and Early Classical Greek warfare.

FACT CHECK

In light of the key role played by the passage in modern analyses, it should be stressed first of all that none of Mardonius' statements about the Greek way of war is true. Herodotus and other ancient authors provide plenty of evidence to support this, and

[2] V.D. Hanson, 'The ideology of hoplite battle, ancient and modern', in Hanson (n. 1 [1991]), 3–11, at 6.

[3] Grundy (n. 1), 276; P. Cartledge, 'Hoplites and heroes: Sparta's contribution to the technique of ancient warfare', *JHS* 97 (1977), 11–27, at 11; Connor (n. 1), 27–8; J. Ober, 'The rules of war in Classical Greece', in J. Ober, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton, 1999^2), 53–71, at 66–70; Mitchell (n. 1), 95–6, 101–2; Sage (n. 1), xix-xxi; V.D. Hanson, 'Hoplite battle as ancient Greek warfare: when, where and why?', in H. van Wees (ed.), *War and Violence in Ancient Greece* (London, 2000), 201–32, at 205, 212, 213; J.W.I. Lee, 'Land warfare in Xenophon's *Hellenika*', in R.B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Xenophon's Hellenika* (New York, 2009), 391–4, at 391.

[4] Or indeed any period; one of the greatest weaknesses of these passages is their lack of any indication of what age they are referring to. For recent critiques, see P. Krentz, 'Deception in Archaic and Classical Greek warfare', in H. van Wees (ed.), *War and Violence in Ancient Greece* (London, 2000), 167–200, at 168–71, 178; id., 'Fighting by the rules: the invention of the hoplite *agon*', *Hesperia* 71 (2002), 23–39, at 27–9; H. van Wees, *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities* (London, 2004), 115–16; J.C. Dayton, *The Athletes of War: An Evaluation of the Agonistic Elements of Greek Warfare* (Toronto, 2005), 127–36, 146, 148, 151–3; R.M. Sheldon, *Ambush: Surprise Attack in Ancient Greek Warfare* (Croydon, 2012), 49–50.

[5] E.L. Wheeler and B. Strauss, 'Battle', in P. Sabin, H. van Wees and M. Whitby (edd.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare* 1: *Greece, the Hellenistic World and the Rise of Rome* (Cambridge, 2008), 186–222, at 190.

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scholars as early as Delbrück already pointed to such evidence to suggest that the contents of the speech may not be as clear-cut and programmatic as we would like.[6]

First, the passage implies that Greek battles occurred at a time and place the combatants had agreed upon beforehand. In fact, there is only one known battle in all of Greek history that was arranged in this way. This battle, the famous Battle of the Champions between three hundred picked men each from Argos and Sparta, is not only an anomaly in the extant record; as an experiment with limited war, it was also a complete failure. The two sides could not agree over who had won, and ended up launching their whole armies into an all-out pitched battle anyway. After this debacle, as far as we know, the concept was never again brought into practice; in the late fifth century, when the Argives offered the Spartans a chance for a second round, they are said to have scoffed at the very idea.[7]

Second, a glance at the casualty figures reported by ancient sources reveals that Mardonius' claims of battlefield carnage are blatant exaggerations. In battles of Greek against Greek the losses suffered by the winning side averaged about five percent, against some fourteen-percent casualties among the defeated.[8] While these losses would have been by no means slight for the small communities that sustained them, they are nowhere near the complete annihilation alluded to by Mardonius.

Third, the speech leaves us with the impression that Greek warfare consisted exclusively of open battle. Indeed, Mardonius goes on to say that the Greeks really ought to occupy the strong points in their land, but that they are too stupid to realize this, and fight in the plain instead (Hdt. 7.9β.2). Modern scholars have expanded on these claims, arguing that Greeks only fought in the open and in the daytime, without reserves or tactical manoeuvres, and that whole wars were decided by a few hours of brutal hoplite combat.[9] Yet this is entirely disproven by Herodotus' record of the Late Archaic period, which is full of surprise attacks, trickery, night fighting, sieges and ambushes. Krentz's collection of examples of military deception stretches back well beyond the Persian Wars, while Sheldon has recently argued that 'the single most common motif in Herodotean military accounts is deception or trickery'.[10] Greek defence against the Persians in particular was marked mainly by their efforts to *avoid* pitched battle—an approach well understood by Herodotus, who describes its Scythian precedent in great detail (4.120-42). In their attempts to conquer the Greeks, the Persians had been forced to fight costly siege battles at Miletus and Eretria, and would later face opponents

[6] H. Delbrück, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte* (Berlin, 1908[2]), 1.129; C. Pelling, 'Thucydides' Archidamus and Herodotus' Artabanus', in M.A. Flower and M. Toher (edd.), *Georgica: Greek Studies in Honour of George Cawkwell* (London 1991), 120–42, at 132; Krentz (n. 4 [2002]), 25–9; Dayton (n. 4), 52–5; L. Rawlings, *The Ancient Greeks at War* (Manchester, 2007), 64; P. Krentz, 'War', in Sabin, van Wees and Whitby (n. 5), 147–85, at 147. M. Moggi, 'L'oplitismo secondo Mardonio (Erodoto 7, 9)', in S. Alessandrì (ed.), *Ἱστορίη: Studi Offerti dagli Allievi a Giuseppe Nenci in Occasione del suo Settantesimo Compleanno* (Lecce, 1994), 319–32 has rightly stressed (at 330–2) that Mardonius' judgement is flawed at the most fundamental level in its assumption that all Greeks waged war in the same way.

[7] Hdt. 1.82; Thuc. 5.41.3; van Wees (n. 4), 134; Dayton (n. 4), 48; Rawlings (n. 6), 66. At Plataea, Mardonius himself is said to have offered a similar challenge to the Spartans, which was also turned down (Hdt. 9.48).

[8] The evidence is gathered in P. Krentz, 'Casualties in hoplite battles', *GRBS* 26 (1985), 13–20, and discussed in Dayton (n. 4), 81–102.

[9] F.E. Adcock, *The Greek and Macedonian Art of War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1957), 7; A.J. Holladay, 'Hoplites and heresies', *JHS* 102 (1982), 94–103, at 97; Hanson (n. 2), 3–5; id. (n. 3), 203, 207, 216, 219, 222.

[10] Krentz (n. 4 [2000]), 183–4; Sheldon (n. 4), 86.

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holding a string of geographical bottlenecks to negate the Persian numerical advantage. At Plataea, Mardonius did what he could to bring the Greeks down from their strong position in the hills; knowing better than to fight fairly, the Greeks refused to comply. It will not do to argue that these were new ways to fight a new enemy. The Phocian wall, rebuilt by the Spartans to block the pass at Thermopylae, was already there when they arrived.[11]

The Greeks certainly did sometimes fight pitched battles on level ground—just like the Persians, and countless other peoples throughout history. The question is to what extent this may serve as a characterization of Greek warfare as a whole. Even looking at over four centuries of Greek history from archaic times down to the Macedonian conquest, we do not hear of more than a few dozen major pitched battles; if we look only at the period before the Persian Wars, the list becomes very short indeed.[12] Krentz has argued that the option was only really considered if numbers on both sides were roughly equal.[13] The concept of fighting in the open may have existed as an ideal, but the sheer ubiquity of other means of waging war should make us doubt whether pitched battle was in any sense the default option, as Mardonius seems to suggest.

Since these objections to the speech are derived primarily from Herodotus' own work, we cannot avoid the conclusion that he made Mardonius say things that Herodotus knew to be false. Of course, since he is not likely to have known exactly what was said in the inner council of the Great King, it must be assumed that he made his characters say either what he thought they might say, or what he needed them to say for the sake of his narrative. So why did Herodotus put these particular words in Mardonius' mouth?

INTERPRETATIONS

Scholars in various fields of study have attempted to tackle this problem; over the years, a number of different suggestions have been made as to how we should interpret the speech, and whether this leaves us with anything from which to deduce the nature of Late Archaic Greek warfare.

It has often been argued that the passage is a Persian caricature of a way of war they must have regarded as idiotic.[14] Hoplites crashing headlong into each other with no regard for stratagem or survival—a cruder form of warfare seems scarcely imaginable. Herodotus indeed represents this view elsewhere: in his description of the battle of Marathon, he points out that the Persians considered the Greeks 'suicidally insane' to

[11] Hdt. 6.18, 6.101, 7.172-5, 7.201, 8.71, 9.20.1, 7.176.3-5.

[12] L. Rawlings, 'Alternative agonies: hoplite martial and combat experiences beyond the phalanx', in H. van Wees (ed.), *War and Violence in Ancient Greece* (London, 2000), 233–59, at 234; id. (n. 6), 66–9. Hanson (in Hanson [n. 1 (1991)], x) identified twenty-two 'major Greek battles' for the entirety of the Archaic and Classical periods combined, of which only seventeen were of Greek against Greek.

[13] P. Krentz, 'The strategic culture of Periclean Athens', in C.D. Hamilton and P. Krentz (edd.), *Polis and Polemos: Essays on Politics, War and History in Ancient Greece in Honor of Donald Kagan* (Claremont, CA, 1997), 55–72, at 61, 65–70; id. (n. 4 [2000]), 177.

[14] Detienne (n. 1), 124 n. 21; Holladay (n. 9), 97; Ducrey (n. 1), 287; J.A. Evans, 'The dream of Xerxes and the *nomoi* of the Persians', in J.A. Evans, *The Beginnings of History: Herodotus and the Persian Wars* (Campbellville, Ontario, 2006), 123–8, at 124; Lendon (n. 1), 42–3; Wheeler and Strauss (n. 5), 190–1; van Wees (n. 4 [2004]), 116; id., 'Defeat and destruction: the ethics of ancient Greek warfare', in S. Tausend (ed.), *"Böser Krieg": Exzessive Gewalt in der antiken Kriegsführung und Strategien zu deren Vermeidung* (Bayreuth, 2011), 69–110, at 99.

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attack without supporting cavalry or archers (Hdt. 6.112.2).[15] If we may credit him with the ability to put himself in the shoes of another culture's leaders, this may seem a reasonable way to explain the strange exaggerations found in the speech. From a narrative point of view, Mardonius would of course be the character of choice to express this Persian disdain; both Herodotus and his audience knew that he, as the Persian commander at Plataea, would eventually be forced to eat his words.[16]

Others have suggested that this portion of Mardonius' speech may have had little to do with the Persians at all; with its condemnation of senseless bloodshed, it fits into Herodotus' general disapproval of war itself.[17] More than a century ago, Macan already argued that the whole passage was actually a criticism of Greek in-fighting—a view that still has its adherents in recent scholarship.[18] While this interpretation puts an admonition aimed at Greeks in a rather unexpected place, it certainly explains the speech's bitter tone and grim assessment of the outcome of pitched battle.

Finally, several scholars have pointed to the crucial fact that the characterization of Mardonius in Herodotus is that of the archetypal bad adviser.[19] A cousin of the king, he ranks highly among Xerxes' trusted men, but his initiatives lead his betters to misery and ruin; almost everything he says is clearly wrong.[20] It would make sense for such a character to encourage Xerxes to invade Greece; Herodotus' audience, after all, knew very well who won in the end. In fact, Artabanus, the nobleman who speaks after Mardonius in the council scene, tells him outright that his judgement of the Greeks is nothing but 'slander' and 'nonsense'.[21] In this view, Mardonius' description of Greek warfare is just another one of his misguided counsels, as he and the rest of the Persians would find out to their cost.

At this point the difference in analysis between military historians and Herodotean scholars is striking. As we have seen, many experts on Greek warfare have taken the speech more or less at face value; even the more sceptical authors usually favour an interpretation that leaves it with a kernel of truth about Greek or Persian attitudes.

[15] At 8.10.1, the Greeks are again considered 'completely insane', this time for sailing against the Persian fleet at Artemisium while heavily outnumbered.

[16] The case for 'Herodotean dramatic irony' was made most recently in P. Cartledge, 'Hoplitai/politai: refighting ancient battles', in D. Kagan and G.F. Viggiano (edd.), *Men of Bronze: Hoplite Warfare in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, 2013), 74–84, at 78–9.

[17] K.A. Raaflaub, 'Philosophy, science, politics: Herodotus and the intellectual trends of his time', in E.J. Bakker, I.J.F. de Jong and H. van Wees (edd.), *Brill's Companion to Herodotus* (Leiden, 2002), 149–86, at 171, 178; id., 'Persian army and warfare in the mirror of Herodotus's interpretation', in R. Rollinger, B. Truschnegg and R. Bichler (edd.), *Herodot und das persische Weltreich/Herodotus and the Persian Empire* (Wiesbaden, 2011), 5–37, at 30; L.A. Tritle, '"Laughing for joy": war and peace among the Greeks', in K. Raaflaub (ed.), *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (Malden, MA, 2007), 172–90, at 173–4; id., 'Warfare in Herodotus', in C. Dewald and J. Marincola (edd.), *The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus* (Cambridge, 2007), 209–23, at 211–12; J.R. Hale, 'Not patriots, not farmers, not amateurs: Greek soldiers of fortune and the origins of hoplite warfare', in D. Kagan and G.F. Viggiano (edd.), *Men of Bronze: Hoplite Warfare in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, 2013), 176–93, at 178.

[18] R.W. Macan, *Herodotus: The Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Books* 1.1 (London, 1908), 14; see Pelling (n. 6), 134; S. Forsdyke, 'Herodotus, political history and political thought', in Dewald and Marincola (n. 17), 224–41, at 235.

[19] R. Lattimore, 'The wise adviser in Herodotus', *CPh* 34 (1939), 24–35, at 31; Krentz (n. 13), 60; M.A. Flower and J. Marincola, *Herodotus Histories Book IX* (Cambridge, 2002), 193; Rawlings (n. 6), 64–5.

[20] Krentz (n. 13), 60, citing Hdt. 7.5, 8.100, 9.41, 9.58; M.A. Sears, 'A note on Mardonius' emissaries', *Mouseion* 9 (2009), 21–8, at 21–3, 27.

[21] Hdt. 7.10η; Moggi (n. 6), 324–6.

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Scholars of the text, on the other hand, tend to reject the passage emphatically as the transparently flawed rhetoric of an untrustworthy character. Pelling describes Mardonius' words as 'gushful and delusive flattery' marked by 'painfully gaping holes in his argument and insight'; elsewhere he calls the adviser's judgement 'absurdly wrong'. Forsdyke has similarly dismissed the speech as 'full of subservient flattery and patent falsehoods'.[22] This is indeed what we should expect if we are to regard Mardonius as the personification of blind ambition and arrogant folly.

Discrepancies between Mardonius' characterization and his actions reveal Herodotus' hand. The historian repeatedly states that Mardonius was blindly determined to fight the battle of Plataea, but Lazenby has shown that the narrative of the campaign actually suggests he was trying to avoid it; his strategy seems to have been aimed at breaking the Greek alliance apart and dealing with its demoralized members one at a time.[23] Similarly, Sears has pointed out that, despite Herodotus' constant insistence on the Persian commander's poor judgement, Mardonius' selection of emissaries to Greek states showed great diplomatic skill on his part, and a genuine commitment to the idea of winning the war by shrewd political manipulation.[24] Both scholars expose Herodotus' efforts to mould a historical character to fit a particular role. The real Mardonius may not have been a bad adviser at all—but Herodotus never misses an opportunity to represent him as such. It follows that every word Herodotus puts in Mardonius' mouth should be judged with extreme caution.

The other interpretations noted here are less consistent with the rest of Herodotus' work. Since the character of Mardonius is deliberately made to seem so questionable, it would be odd for the historian to use him as a mouthpiece for his own ideas; the intended voice of reason in the council scene is Artabanus,[25] who specifically attacks Mardonius' assessment of Greek ways. This seems to rule out any suggestion that the passage was meant as a lesson to the Greeks.[26] Similarly, the speech cannot have served very well as a caricature, when Herodotus' account of events—and a good deal of Persian experience up to that point—showed just how little the Greek way of war was defined by the element mocked by Mardonius. Besides, if the point is to suggest that no Persian properly understood Greek warfare, why does Artabanus not share Mardonius' prejudice? There is more to be said for van Wees' subtle distinction that the passage was meant to deride an *ideal*,[27] but the question remains why Mardonius

[22] Pelling (n. 6), 132; id., 'Speech and narrative in the *Histories*', in Dewald and Marincola (n. 17), 103–21, at 110; Forsdyke (n. 18), 234; see also Lattimore (n. 19), 31; Moggi (n. 6), 326–8; id., 'Artabano in Erodoto', in M. Giangiulio (ed.), *Erodoto e il 'Modello Erodoteo': Formazione e Transmissione delle Tradizioni Storiche in Grecia* (Trento, 2005), 193–214, at 196, 198; J. Grethlein, 'How not to do history: Xerxes in Herodotus' *Histories*', *AJPh* 130 (2009), 195–218, at 200–1.

[23] J.F. Lazenby, *The Defence of Greece 490-479 B.C.* (Warminster, 1993), 218–21, 228–30.

[24] Sears (n. 20), 23–7.

[25] Moggi (n. 22), 196; A.M. Bowie, *Herodotus* Histories *Book VIII* (Cambridge, 2007), 9, 117; Grethlein (n. 22), 201–2; Sears (n. 20), 21. In the words of Pelling (n. 6), 120 characters like Artabanus 'positively ooze wisdom', even if their cautious views are not always wholly vindicated by the events that ensue.

[26] Of course, Mardonius is not wrong about *everything*; it has been noted (Pelling [n. 22], 110; Forsdyke [n. 18], 235) that he rightly stresses the disunity of the Greeks, which nearly proved fatal during Xerxes' invasion, and which led to catastrophic internecine war during Herodotus' lifetime. However, I would argue that Herodotus' point here is not to suggest that even the most misguided counsellors are capable of saying clever things, but rather that what most discredits the Greeks is that they proved Mardonius right.

[27] van Wees (n. 4 [2004]), 116.

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is made to target that particular and apparently subordinate aspect of Greek military thought, instead of addressing their actual methods—as Artabanus to some extent actually does.[28]

It seems more helpful, then, to embrace the view that Mardonius is forcibly cast as a bad adviser in Herodotus' work, and to assume that anything he says is therefore suspicious. Scholars of the text are right to remind us of Herodotus' role in shaping the narrative. Yet, this does not by itself explain the actual content of the speech. If the character of Mardonius has been carefully constructed to fit a particular role, we should assume that the same applies to the phrases that were meant to bear this out. So what was the point of his peculiar description of Greek warfare? In order to understand what purpose the speech served, we need to look more closely at its narrative context.

MARDONIUS' COUNSEL

The scene is 'an assembly of the noblest of the Persians' (Hdt. 7.8.1), to whom the Great King puts a straightforward question: should he punish Athens and conquer Greece? The two nobles who reply represent opposite character types with opposite views.[29] Mardonius, the ambitious aristocrat, is trying to get Xerxes to embark on the expedition—not least because he himself hopes to make a profit, and perhaps even become satrap of Greece (Hdt. 7.6.1). Artabanus, the cautious courtier, instead urges caution. The Persians' last campaign of conquest did not go well—as Artabanus had predicted at the time (Hdt. 4.83)—and Xerxes would be better off consolidating his empire than risking it in far-flung adventures; moreover, the invasion of Greece would pose even greater logistical and military challenges than Darius' failed campaign against Scythia (Hdt. 7.10α.2-δ.1). Against such opposition, Mardonius needs strong arguments. What could he say to persuade Xerxes to go ahead with this massive undertaking?

The first point he makes is that the Greeks are so pathetically poor and weak that they will not even think of making a stand against the full might of Persia (Hdt. 7.9α). This appears boastful and contemptuous, but Mardonius could base his claim on personal experience; in the campaign of 492, he conquered Thasos and some Greek settlements in Thrace without encountering any Greek resistance whatsoever. Only the Thracians and the elements stopped him in his tracks (Hdt. 6.43-5).[30] In his view it may have been fair to suggest that the rest of Greece would do no better.

Yet, by itself this point seems overly optimistic.[31] Even Mardonius would have been well aware of the tenacity of the rebellious Ionian cities, and of Datis' defeat at Marathon; Xerxes would not simply have taken his word for it that the Greeks would yield without a fight. More was needed to make the case that taking their lands would be easy. Mardonius therefore goes on to suggest that they waste what little they have, not settling their disputes with words, but fighting each other in the most

[28] Grethlein (n. 22), 200–2.

[29] The stark contrast between the speakers has been stressed by Lattimore (n. 19), 31 and more recently Moggi (n. 22), 193–4.

[30] At 7.9α.2, Mardonius makes explicit reference to these events.

[31] Pelling (n. 22), 110 in fact called it 'absurdly wrong', but this seems too harsh; Herodotus took care to provide Mardonius with a reason to believe his own words.

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destructive way they can—implying that this has left them with neither the willingness nor the manpower to cooperate against Persia.

It is a neat argument—but it is not quite complete. For a campaign on this scale, the worst-case scenario must be considered. What if the Greeks *do* choose to resist? What if, despite their rivalry and poverty, they manage to raise an army against Xerxes? How is Mardonius to convince the Great King that the Greeks will not be able to withstand him even if they try?

There is an interesting parallel earlier in Herodotus, where he offers an answer to just such a question.[32] Aristagoras, the ambitious deputy tyrant of Miletus and chief instigator of the Ionian Revolt, hopes to obtain support from the Spartans—the 'leaders of Greece' as he calls them—by convincing their king Cleomenes to invade the Persian Empire. This is the true calling of Sparta, he claims; endless spoils await. But Cleomenes and his little daughter Gorgo know better (Hdt. 5.50-1). Here we have a ludicrously unrealistic scheme, presented by Aristagoras as a genuine opportunity to a people wholly without the means to carry it out. It takes all his ingenuity to keep the Spartans from chasing him out of town for the mere suggestion. Strikingly, the best argument he can come up with is that the Persians are of no consequence in war (Hdt. 5.49.3-4):

οὔτε γὰρ οἱ βάρβαροι ἄλκιμοι εἰσί, ὑμεῖς τε τὰ ἐς τὸν πόλεμον ἐς τὰ μέγιστα ἀνήκετε ἀρετῆς πέρι. ἥ τε μάχη αὐτῶν ἐστὶ τοιήδε, τόξα καὶ αἰχμὴ βραχέα· ἀναξυρίδας δὲ ἔχοντες ἔρχονται ἐς τὰς μάχας καὶ κυρβασίας ἐπὶ τῇσι κεφαλῇσι. οὕτω εὐπετέες χειρωθῆναί εἰσι.

For the barbarians are not brave, and you have the greatest renown in war. And they fight like this: they have bows and short spears, and they go to battle wearing trousers and turbans, so they are easy to overcome.

But for a mention of battlefield losses, this is the same argument used by Mardonius. Could Herodotus be trying to mirror the scene, with an ambitious noble attempting to lure a king into an ill-advised venture by making it seem like a walk in the park?

Raaflaub has pointed out that this pattern extends beyond Herodotus.[33] There are striking similarities between the content and context of Mardonius' argument and that of the speech given by Alcibiades to persuade the Athenian assembly to sail for Sicily. Again, the speaker is an ambitious aristocrat dreaming of personal gain; again, a cautious counsellor favours a less adventurous course; again, the scene is made bitterly ironic by the audience's awareness of what followed. And again, one of the crucial arguments is that the enemy does not know how to fight. The peoples of Sicily are 'rabbles' (ὄχλοις), Alcibiades says, who cannot work together, and in any case 'do not have as many hoplites as they boast'; moreover, the Athenians 'will rule the sea even against all the Siciliots put together' (Thuc. 6.17.2-6.18.5).

The point to be stressed here is that in all three cases the speakers were wrong, and our authors want us to realize that they were wrong. Herodotus relates how Aristagoras made it to Athens and spun the same tale before the *dēmos*—and, he laments, the

[32] Hdt. 5.49.2-4; Wheeler and Strauss (n. 5), 191 n. 20 have noted this link between the two passages. Forsdyke (n. 18), 234–5 has pointed out that these two speeches are also similar in their reliance on flattery.

[33] K.A. Raaflaub, 'Herodot und Thukydides: persischer Imperialismus im Lichten der athenischen Sizilienpolitik', in N. Ehrhardt and L.-M. Günther (edd.), *Widerstand – Anpassung – Integration. Die griechische Staatenwelt und Rom* (Stuttgart, 2002), 11–40, at 23–5.

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Milesian managed to convince them to support him, proving that 'it is easier to deceive many than one' (Hdt. 5.97). During the council scene, as we have seen, Artabanus is made to scold Mardonius for his misleading lies. Xerxes, at first taken in by Mardonius' encouragements and outraged by Artabanus' protestations, is later shown to change his mind, realizing that Artabanus was right all along. It takes persistent divine intervention to get him to commit to the ill-fated plan (Hdt. 7.11-18). As for Thucydides, he has Nicias explain almost point by point why Alcibiades is wrong; each of his arguments is confirmed in the course of the campaign, and 'few out of many came back home'.[34]

Raaflaub may be right, therefore, to regard these speeches as warnings against the poor judgement of greedy imperialism.[35] Yet, it takes a more careful adviser like Artabanus or Nicias—or, in Cleomenes' case, a precocious child—to point out where the case falls down. Somehow these appeals to the enemy's military weakness were meant to sound plausible to a less attentive or more impressionable audience. In order to understand Mardonius' words, we need to ask ourselves how exactly they were meant to persuade Xerxes.

THE EASTERN WAY OF WAR

This question is not as easy to answer as it may seem. In fact, if we bear in mind that his audience was Persian, Mardonius is made to say some very odd things indeed.

Persian battle tactics relied on a core of heavy infantry supported by large numbers of cavalry armed with javelins and bows.[36] This cavalry had trouble negotiating broken ground and narrow spaces; it functioned best on open plains, where it had room to manoeuvre. In such terrain, however, it ruled supreme. Classical sources are littered with passages showing that Greeks were terrified of having to face cavalry in the open. The Athenian expedition to Thessaly during the First Peloponnesian War failed because Thessalian horsemen confined the Athenians to their camp; Nicias complained constantly that his forces at Syracuse were helpless against the enemy horse; the Ten Thousand on their retreat from Cunaxa breathed a sigh of relief when they reached hilly terrain, where they would finally be free from the pursuing Persian cavalry.[37] Xenophon puts it matter-of-factly in his description of the first Spartan campaign against the Persians in Asia Minor (Xen. *Hell.* 3.1.5): 'Thibron, seeing the horsemen, did not go down into the plain' (ὁρῶν Θίβρων τὸ ἱππικὸν εἰς τὸ πεδίον οὐ κατέβαινεν). Agesilaus,

[34] Thuc. 6.20-3, 7.87.6; V.J. Hunter, *Thucydides the Artful Reporter* (Toronto, 1973), 127–8. Lattimore (n. 19), 35 n. 31 rightly noted that we should not raise Nicias to the status of wise adviser; Thucydides' characterization of the general is more complex. However, Nicias certainly takes the part of the 'tragic warner' and the voice of caution in this case.

[35] Raaflaub (n. 33), 21, 35; Grethlein (n. 22), 196 in fact calls this 'the popular reading of the *Histories*'.

[36] For helpful treatments, see N. Sekunda, *The Persian Army 560-330 B.C.* (Oxford, 1982); D. Head, *The Achaemenid Persian Army* (Stockport, 1992); Lazenby (n. 23), 21–33; J.W.I. Lee, 'The Persian army in Herodotus', in R.B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Herodotus* (London, 2008), 805–9; R. Konijnendijk, '"Neither the less valorous nor the weaker": Persian military might and the battle of Plataia', *Historia* 61 (2012), 1–17, at 7–10, although C. Tuplin ('All the king's horse', in G.G. Fagan and M. Trundle [edd.], *New Perspectives on Ancient Warfare* [Leiden, 2010], 101–82, at 178–82) has argued that we should not overestimate the importance of cavalry in Persian society and warfare.

[37] Thuc. 1.111.1, 6.20.4, 6.21.1, 6.22, 6.68.3, 7.11.2, 7.13.2; Xen. *An.* 3.4.24.

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too, knew that he needed cavalry of his own 'so he would not have to wage war by running away (ὡς μὴ δραπετεύοντα πολεμεῖν δέοι)' (Xen. *Hell.* 3.4.15). The horseman's domination of level ground was in fact such a pervasive reality that it became a figure of speech in Classical Athens. In his *Theaetetus*, Plato has one of his characters joke that 'he who challenges Socrates to an argument is challenging "cavalry in the plain".'[38] For our purposes we may turn this phrase around. He who challenges cavalry in the plain is challenging Socrates to an argument: it is exactly what he wants you to do, and you are going to lose.

Given the role of these troops in Persian warfare, the notion of seeking out 'the finest, flattest piece of land' to fight a battle must have been familiar to the Persians. Indeed, Herodotus says they landed at Marathon specifically because the ground there was suitable for horsemen. In 479, Mardonius himself withdrew from Attica to the open expanse of Boeotia to provide his cavalry with a better battlefield; at Plataea he spent ten days trying to lure the Greeks down from their camp into the plain, where the Persians would have the advantage.[39] For both battles, *they* chose the battlefield—and they chose the plain. From Plataea to Cunaxa to Gaugamela, the Persians loved to fight on the flattest piece of land—the horseman's land, the kind of land where they held all the cards. This inevitably raises the question: if fighting on open ground was such a prominent feature of the *Persian* way of war, why would Mardonius present this habit as typically *Greek*—and why would he call it stupid?

The key is in the context of the speech. It seems superfluous for Artabanus to spell out Mardonius' rhetorical purpose, but in this case it clearly needed emphasis: 'by slandering the Greeks' (Ἕλληνας γὰρ διαβάλλων), he berates his opponent, 'you incite the king to march' (Hdt. 7.10η.1). Xerxes needed to know it could be done. No doubt he feared a fruitless campaign like that of his father against the Scythians, who stubbornly refused to meet the Persians in the field. He would presumably be equally apprehensive about the prospect of a drawn-out costly campaign reducing cities and mountain strongholds in the hinterland. What he wanted was a battle, the kind of large decisive engagement that was the Persians' forte—a battle that would allow his vast army to settle the business with a single blow.[40] And this—pitched battle in open ground—is exactly what Mardonius promised him.[41]

In his speech, Mardonius presents a carefully crafted multifaceted lie. He claims first of all that it will take no more than a show of force to get the poverty-stricken Greeks to submit; if they do fight, he says, they will do so in their own senseless way. They will come out into the open. They would do better to retreat to strong fortified positions—as any sane man would expect—but they fail to understand this, and foolishly fight in the plain.

This must have been music to Xerxes' ears. Of all the pitched battles fought between Persian and Greek forces up to that time, the Persians had lost only one; even that fight, at

[38] 'ἱππέας εἰς πεδίον' προκαλῇ Σωκράτη εἰς λόγους προκαλούμενος, Pl. *Tht.* 183d.

[39] Hdt. 6.102, 9.13.3, 9.20.1, 9.41, 9.49-51; P. Krentz, *The Battle of Marathon* (New Haven and London, 2010), 103, 139, 143; K.A. Raaflaub, 'Early Greek infantry fighting in a Mediterranean context', in D. Kagan and G.F. Viggiano (edd.), *Men of Bronze: Hoplite Warfare in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, 2013), 95–111, at 98.

[40] G. Cawkwell, *The Greek Wars: The Failure of Persia* (New York, 2005), 103–5.

[41] To my knowledge this was first suggested by Krentz (n. 4 [2000]), 178, who unfortunately did not elaborate on this essential point. Tritle (n. 17 [2007], 'Laughing'), 173 remarked that the speech served 'to convince Xerxes that a conquest of Greece would pose few problems', but, like Krentz, he did not expand on this insight.

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Marathon, had been a close call.[42] Xerxes would have been fully confident of the abilities of his men—even more so if he raised a royal army led by his elite personal guard.[43] Given the chance to fight in the open, his infantry and cavalry would combine to crush the Greeks, ensuring a short, glorious and profitable campaign. Within the logic of his own argument, Mardonius was right to call the Greeks stupid; for them to march down and meet the Persians in the plain would be proof of very poor judgement indeed. It is by such misleading claims that the Great King could be made to embark on a war of conquest.

In the course of the narrative of the invasion itself, Herodotus stresses several times that Mardonius was held personally and uniquely responsible for instigating the campaign. After Thermopylae, when Tritantaechmes—notably a son of Artabanus[44]—finds out that the athletes at the Olympic Games do not compete for money but purely for the glory of victory, he cries out 'Mardonius, what sort of men have you led us to fight against?'. At this point Xerxes is still in command, and Mardonius is not even explicitly present at the scene.[45] Herodotus later describes what happens when news of the defeat at Salamis reaches Susa (Hdt. 8.99.2): the people 'tore their tunics and cried and wailed endlessly, *blaming Mardonius*' (Μαρδόνιον ἐν αἰτίῃ τιθέντες).[46] We are then shown Mardonius himself, offering to stay behind with Xerxes' best troops to finish the job—'thinking that he would be punished for persuading the king to march against Hellas' (Hdt. 8.100.1). The point is so explicit that we may suspect a Persian effort to scapegoat the king's cousin for the failure of the campaign. However this may be, the story in Herodotus is clear. Mardonius lied to Xerxes; Xerxes was persuaded; disaster predictably ensued.

SENSELESS GREEKS?

Should we assume that any part of Mardonius' speech applies to actual Greek warfare? The link with the scene of Aristagoras at Sparta is particularly relevant here. If we compare Aristagoras' talk of bows and breeches to what we know of the Persian way of war, it is instantly clear how poor his characterization is. No reader of Herodotus would take his feebly disguised rhetoric seriously. Aristagoras does not speak of the Persians' vast numbers on land and sea, does not acknowledge their eye for logistics and engineering, and completely fails to mention their war-winning cavalry. Herodotus is happy to report these Persian strengths elsewhere, and in fact seems fond of repeating again and again that Persian might is unstoppable[47]—but of course his conniving Milesian would say nothing of the sort in his attempt to persuade the king of Sparta.

[42] Lazenby (n. 23), 33, 43–4; Rawlings (n. 6), 93–4; Krentz (n. 39), 159. C. Tuplin ('Intolerable clothes and a terrifying name: the characteristics of an Achaemenid invasion force', in C. Carey and M. Edwards [edd.], *Marathon – 2,500 Years: Proceedings of the Marathon Conference 2010* [London, 2013], 223–39, at 224) discusses Herodotus' comment (6.112.3) that the Athenians were the first Greeks to face the Persians without panicking.

[43] Mardonius takes care to remind him that the Persians are 'the best warriors of all mankind' (7.9β.2); at 7.103.5, Xerxes is made to boast that some of his spearmen would gladly take on three Greeks at once.

[44] Bowie (n. 25), 117–8 notes the significance of this connection.

[45] Μαρδόνιε, κοίους ἐπ' ἄνδρας ἤγαγες μαχησομένους ἡμέας, Hdt. 8.26.3.

[46] At 7.10θ.3, Artabanus already predicted that those left behind 'will hear that Mardonius has inflicted great evils on Persia'.

[47] Hdt. 5.36.2, 5.124.1, 6.13.1, 7.168.2, 8.10.1–2, 8.24.2, 8.140; see T. Harrison, 'The long arm of the king (Hdt. 8.140-142)', in Rollinger, Truschnegg and Bichler (n. 17), 65–74, at 67–8.

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Mardonius' account of Greek warfare is of the same kind. It is an absurdly selective description driven entirely by its manipulative function. Herodotus makes Mardonius limit Greek warfare exclusively to the kind of engagement the Persians are likely to win. The Great King would prefer a fight on the smoothest possible plain, where Persian numbers and cavalry would make short work of any opponent; such a fight, Mardonius claims, is what he shall have if he invades Greece—if the Greeks would dare to resist him at all. He does not mention how they may defend cities tenaciously from the walls, how they may block passes and peninsulas and use the terrain to their advantage, or how they may refuse battle and forcibly prolong a campaign.[48] All of this they did in the course of the Persian Wars. They did unite, they did resist and they did *not* conduct the war as Mardonius promised they would. The decisive land battle of Xerxes' campaign was not fought on the plain, because the Greeks would not come down to it; the Persians, as a result, could not fully deploy their trump card, their flexible mounted force. Instead, they were drawn into a heavy infantry engagement in the hills. They fought bravely and bitterly, but they lost in the end; Mardonius himself fell with his men.[49]

Herodotus achieves narrative irony on several levels here. Despite Mardonius' speech, he makes the *Persians* reject alternative approaches, such as the establishment of fortified bases in enemy territory (Hdt. 7.235-6) or the use of bribes to provoke factional strife within the city-states (Hdt. 9.2.2-9.3.1, 9.41.3-4). Their minds appear fixed on fighting a great pitched battle—'following Persian custom' (νόμῳ τῷ Περσέων χρεωμένους, Hdt. 9.41.4). We have already seen that this supposed attitude is not actually reflected in Mardonius' actions; Herodotus imposed it on his character for maximum effect. In his account, the very strategy mocked by the Persian aristocrat proved his undoing. Mardonius ended up personally leading his army to annihilation in a battle that was nothing like his promises—except in its outcome. The defeated were, indeed, utterly destroyed.

Mardonius' attitude, then, is a literary device; his speech is not a characterization of Greek warfare in any period. We should not be fooled by lies Herodotus figured might fool Xerxes. The historian's own chapters on Late Archaic history make it very clear how wrong Mardonius is, and Artabanus is made to say it to his face for good measure. As Herodotus' audience, we are meant to understand that Mardonius was doing neither the Greeks nor the Persians justice by saying only what the Great King wanted to hear.

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[48] Moggi (n. 6), 321–4 offers an overview of the things Mardonius neglects in his speech.

[49] For the full account, see Hdt. 9.19-70; Plut. *Ar.* 14–19. Veith's brief treatment of the battle in J. Kromayer and G. Veith, *Antike Schlachtfelder: Bausteine zu einer antiken Kriegsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1924–1931), 4.167–9 remains excellent in its essential point; for more detailed modern analyses, see especially Lazenby (n. 23), 217–46, 249–55; L.J. Worley, *Hippeis: The Cavalry of Ancient Greece* (Boulder, CO, 1994), 56–8; S.M. Rusch, *Sparta at War: Strategy, Tactics, and Campaigns, 550-362 B.C.* (London, 2011), 56–66; Konijnendijk (n. 36).

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