

The “Final Problem” at Thermopylae

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THE FINAL PROBLEM of Thermopylae has been neatly defined by How and Wells, “What was the purpose of Leonidas clinging to his position at Thermopylae when it had apparently become untenable?”¹ The question has lost none of its attraction, for in the last four years it has received three fresh treatments. One ingenious solution, proposed by J. R. Grant,² would have it that Leonidas was acting in deliberate disobedience to his orders for reasons which are to be sought in the internal politics of Sparta and in the king’s own stubborn character. A. Dascalakis³ returns to the military solution which has already been put forward by a number of scholars:⁴ Leonidas stayed behind to cover the retreat of his allies who would otherwise have been cut down by the Persian cavalry. C. Hignett, who devotes an appendix in his *Xerxes’ Invasion of Greece* to this problem, reviews the opinions of earlier scholars, but in the end, he himself comes to no satisfactory solution. “In the face of the breakdown of all modern explanations, the ‘final problem’ of Thermopylai is best left an unsolved riddle; agnosticism is preferable to a pretence of knowledge.”⁵

However, two generations of scholars have preferred the pretence of knowledge. With very few exceptions, they have been unwilling to accept what we may call the “official explanation” whereby Leonidas’ last stand was an act of *devotio*, made to save his country from destruction. The oracle of Herodotus 7.220 bears every mark of a *vaticinium post eventum*, designed to restore morale in Greece after the defeat at Thermopylae, and incidentally, to assure the Spartans of ultimate

¹ W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus II* (Oxford 1912) 376–77.

² John R. Grant, “Leonidas’ Last Stand,” *Phoenix* 15 (1961) 14–27.

³ Apostolos Dascalakis, *Problèmes historiques autour de la Bataille des Thermopyles* (Paris 1962) 75–78.

⁴ For example, R. W. Macan, *Herodotus, the Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Books II* (London 1908) App. v p. 284; A. W. Gomme, “A Forgotten Factor of Greek Naval Strategy,” in *Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford 1937) 198 n.1; W. K. Prentice, “Thermopylae and Artemisium,” *TAPA* 51 (1920) 16; G. Busolt, *Griechische Geschichte II*² (Gotha 1895) 686 n.1.

⁵ C. Hignett, *Xerxes’ Invasion of Greece* (Oxford 1963) 378; for his Appendix, see pp. 371–78.

victory.⁶ The message of the oracle to Sparta, and to her allies as well, was that Thermopylae was, in spite of everything, worthwhile. But it should be noted (though no one, to my knowledge, has done so) that Leonidas' *devotio* does not quite fit the oracle. The oracle stated that either Sparta must be taken or a Spartan king die, and if Leonidas was to sacrifice himself like the Neleid Codrus in a similar situation which may have been a conscious parallel, it was not necessary to involve 300 Spartiates in the ordeal, to say nothing of the Thespians and the Thebans. Quite clearly, Leonidas made his decision at Thermopylae in ignorance of Herodotus' oracle.

If the story of the oracle bears the marks of an official explanation, one other reason embedded in Herodotus' text has met with very little more approbation. It is that Leonidas refused to abandon the pass because retreat was contrary to the Spartan code of honor; hence when Leonidas saw that his allies were unwilling to risk the final battle along with him, he sent them away, but stayed behind himself with his Spartiates. This was the view expressed by the Simonidean epigram over the dead Spartiates [7.228.2]:

ὦ ξεῖν', ἀγγέλλειν Λακεδαιμονίοις ὅτι τῆδε
κείμεθα τοῖς κείνων ῥήμασι πειθόμενοι.

Yet the point has been made that no Spartan custom insisted that a soldier must hold an untenable position.⁷ Next year at Plataea, Pausanias was able to make a strategic retreat without violating the Spartan code of honor, and a little earlier the same year a Spartiate commander had retired from Tempe. If good tactics required a strategic retreat, a Spartan commander was quite capable of executing one.

Herodotus [7.220.5] gives Leonidas another motive, which historians have largely disregarded: he wished to win glory for himself and his Spartiates which he did not want to share with his allies, and so he sent them away while he himself remained. Glory he did win, certainly, and it added greatly to the prestige of Sparta. But if he wished to win glory for his own state alone, why did the Thespians and Thebans share in his last stand, the latter unwillingly, according to Herodotus? In any case, would a desire for glory be sufficient motivation for the action which Leonidas took?

The solutions of modern scholars have not fared much better.

⁶ Cf. How and Wells, *op.cit.* 376.

⁷ Cf. Grant, *op.cit.* 15; How and Wells, *op.cit.* 228, 377.

J. B. Bury's suggestion (adopted with modifications by Grundy⁸ and How and Wells⁹) is best summarized in his *History of Greece*: "While part of the force, including Leonidas and the Spartans, remained in the pass, the rest (we may suppose) placed themselves at some distance east of the point where the mountain path descended to the road so as to take Hydarnes in the rear."¹⁰ But the manoeuvre failed; the force sent to meet Hydarnes made good its escape and took pains to conceal its cowardice when it got home. The solution is ingenious, but it lacks any solid evidence to back it; topography, if anything, would suggest that it is unlikely.¹¹

Beloch,¹² and J. A. R. Munro, whose theory was enshrined in the *Cambridge Ancient History*,¹³ suggested a reconstruction of events at Thermopylae which is in some ways attractive. Leonidas, who had heard of Hydarnes' manoeuvre from deserters during the night, but may have been uncertain of his ultimate destination, did nothing until he received reports from the ἡμεροσκοποὶ on the heights. These scouts reached Leonidas ἤδη διαφανούσης ἡμέρης [7.219.2]; it must have been already daylight when they first spotted the Persian Immortals, and when they reached Leonidas, dawn was already past. Now it is clear from Herodotus [7.217.1] that Hydarnes did not make contact with the Phocians before sunrise, and it is conceivable that the scouts spotted the Persians by the first light of dawn as they approached the Phocian garrison post, and rushed off down to Leonidas without waiting to see what transpired. Munro and Beloch suggest that something of this sort did happen. According to Beloch, this incomplete news reached the Greeks, who were left unaware of the Phocian defeat and their immediate danger, and when, shortly afterwards, Hydarnes' troops became visible to the men on the coast road, the Peloponnesian allies fled in panic. According to Munro, Leonidas assumed, as did the Phocians themselves,¹⁴ that Hydarnes was

⁸ G. B. Grundy, *The Great Persian War and its Preliminaries* (London 1901) 317.

⁹ *op.cit.* 376–7.

¹⁰ *A History of Greece to the Death of Alexander the Great*³, rev. by Russell Meiggs (London 1952) 276. Bury first developed this theory in "The Campaign of Artemisium and Thermopylae," *BSA Annual* 2 (1895–6) 83–104.

¹¹ W. Kendrick Pritchett, "New Light on Thermopylai," *AJA* 62 (1958) 211 n.68.

¹² K. J. Beloch, *Griechische Geschichte* II³ (Strassburg 1916) 2, 91–105.

¹³ *CAH* IV, 229; here Munro repeats with modifications a theory developed in "Some Observations on the Persian Wars," *JHS* 22 (1902) 294–332.

¹⁴ *Hdt.* 7.218.3. Cf. J. L. Myres, *Herodotus, the Father of History* (Oxford 1953) 251, who points out that the Phocians may not have appreciated the significance of the Anopaea path for Leonidas on the coast road.

advancing against Phocis and Doris, and sent the Peloponnesian allies to check him. But they managed to miss Hydarnes altogether.

There are some serious objections to these two theories, apart from the fact that their very ingenuity is suspect. As the Immortals advanced along the Anopaea path, they were hidden from view by trees [7.218.1]; the Phocians were unable to see them until they were almost upon them, and if that was the case, it was likely that neither were the *ἡμεροσκόποι* able to spot Hydarnes until the action with the Phocians began. This action was extremely brief; it is highly unlikely that some scouts did not wait to discover how the Phocian garrison met the attack. It was vitally important for Leonidas to know if the Phocians were managing to hold back Hydarnes at least temporarily,¹⁵ for the fact that he had apparently taken no move to reinforce the Phocians when first he heard of Hydarnes' manoeuvre from deserters, suggests that he thought the Phocian force was strong enough to secure the Anopaea path. What the *ἡμεροσκόποι* must have told him was that the Phocians had been by-passed, and that the Persians were coming around to attack the Greek rear, in which case, both Beloch's and Munro's theories collapse.

Grant¹⁶ would seek a solution in Leonidas' own character: he was a stubborn old king, at odds with the ephors who wanted to make the line of defense at the Isthmus, and determined that there should be no more retreating. He acted, therefore, against orders, while the allies who went home did what they had been intended to do. But unless Leonidas was stubborn to the point of irrationality, why should he attempt to hold an untenable position merely to prove a point? For that matter, it is doubtful if he could accomplish even that; to an ephor convinced that the Isthmus was the proper place to make a stand, Leonidas' fate at Thermopylae could only prove to him how right his opinion had been.

The history of warfare is very largely a catalogue of human errors and idiosyncrasies, and undoubtedly the character of Leonidas played its part in determining what transpired at Thermopylae. But the Thebans and Thespians as well as his own Spartans stayed and died with him. He was a man, therefore, with some qualities of leadership, and such men do not throw away their own lives or the lives of their

¹⁵ This information would be so important that it is hard to believe that Leonidas would have made a move until he found it out.

¹⁶ *op.cit.* 14–27.

men without good reason. Leonidas may have made mistakes at Thermopylae, but it is hard to believe that when he stayed to die at Thermopylae he was without any definite military objective. Grant's theory is at best a partial solution.

Apostolos Dascalakis restates what we may call the military solution.¹⁷ It is that Leonidas stayed behind as a rear guard to cover the retreat of his allies. It was hard for an ancient hoplite army to retire in good order before a well-armed enemy, and strategic retreats, such as at Plataea or earlier in Darius' Scythian expedition, were usually carried out under cover of darkness. The difficulties were compounded when the enemy was well-equipped with cavalry, as the Persians were. It is clear from Herodotus' narrative that Leonidas did not have definite information about Hydarnes' movements before dawn, and by that time all hope of retreat under cover of darkness had gone. If the main body of the little Greek army was to escape, the Persians would have to be delayed at Thermopylae by a rear guard.

Grote¹⁸ calls our attention to a fourth-century parallel from Xenophon,¹⁹ where a Spartan commander Anaxibius, ambushed by Iphicrates, orders his men to flee, but will not do so himself, for that would be dishonorable for a Spartan. It would not have violated the Spartiate code had Leonidas retired, but a *headlong* retreat *was* dishonorable. According to Dascalakis, Leonidas made a cold, calculated choice. He held Thermopylae long enough for his Peloponnesian allies to get away, for flight—which was the other alternative—was dishonorable, and as a Spartiate, he preferred to come home on his shield rather than without it.

This military solution is not new, and it is by far the most satisfactory. Those scholars who, like Grant,²⁰ prefer to seek solutions elsewhere, have to minimize the military difficulties of withdrawal for a defeated hoplite army. Yet these difficulties were well-known to any fifth-century Greek, and Herodotus²¹ was no exception. But is the military solution the whole answer? For Leonidas was not faced precisely with a choice between abject flight and a suicidal stand in the

¹⁷ Dascalakis, *op.cit.* 76–78. The military solution is also favored by A. R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks, The Defence of the West, 546–468 B.C.* (London 1962) 417–8.

¹⁸ George Grote, *A History of Greece* [Everyman Ed.] V, 203 n.3.

¹⁹ *Hell.* 4.8.38–9.

²⁰ *op.cit.* 19.

²¹ Cf. 7.9B, where Mardonius remarks on the tremendous casualties suffered by a hoplite army when it is defeated.

pass; his choice was rather between a slow, difficult retreat which might end in disaster, and would certainly cost him heavy casualties, and holding the pass with a rear guard, which would save part of his army at the price of certain death for the other part.

We should not overlook one other reason for Leonidas' sacrifice at Thermopylae, which historians have generally neglected. Leonidas came to the pass as leader of a Greek alliance put together against the Persians in 481 B.C., but the backbone of this alliance apart from Athens was the old Peloponnesian League, Sparta's allies of long standing in the Peloponnesus.²² The interests of Sparta's old allies and those of her new ones north of the Isthmus were by no means identical. It is easy to criticize Sparta for wanting to make a stand at the Isthmus, but we should remember that the Isthmus was the last feasible line of defense, and Sparta could not adopt a strategy at Thermopylae which would denude the Isthmus of troops and render it indefensible in case the Greeks at Thermopylae and Artemisium failed to hold the Persians. Even had she wished to, her allies in the Peloponnesus could hardly have retained confidence in her leadership had she committed her whole land force to a position which could become a trap if the allied Greek fleet, still untried, was defeated at Artemisium.²³

The Peloponnesians were unwilling to die at Thermopylae; they had probably been unenthusiastic about coming so far north in the first place. Leonidas had to protect their interests. For the Thespians and the Theban contingent, which belonged to the anti-Persian faction in Thebes,²⁴ there was no future if the Persians forced the pass; they

²² Cf. P. A. Brunt, "The Hellenic League against Persia," *Historia* 2 (1953-4) 135-163. Brunt argues (p. 145) that the alliance against Persia (which seems to have called itself not the "Hellenic League" but "the Lacedaemonians and their allies") is to be distinguished from the Peloponnesian League, not only because of its wider membership but because of its objectives, which were more far-reaching.

²³ This point has been made—perhaps overstated—by Hugh Last, "Thermopylae," *CR* 57 (1943) 63-66. Last attempts to show that the Greeks committed only a limited force to Thermopylae because they knew that if the Greek fleet at Artemisium was defeated, the Greek position on land could be outflanked.

²⁴ Cf. Plutarch, *de Herod. Mal.* 31; Diodorus, 11.4.7. Burn (*op.cit.* 418) remarks that Plutarch makes "for once a sound point against his bugbear" when he comments that if the Thebans were at Thermopylae as hostages, as Herodotus says, Leonidas would have done better to send them off under escort of the Peloponnesians. It is not usually noted that if Leonidas was able to keep the Thebans against their will, he was able to assert his authority to the end. Even if they stayed willingly, as is probable, it is unlikely that any panic broke out in the Greek camp after the news of Hydarnes' successful manoeuvre reached it. Panic is contagious, and although the Spartiates may have been immune to it, it is not likely that the same can be said for the Thebans and the Thespians.

preferred to stay and fight. And for Sparta, there was the all-important question of prestige.

Sparta held her position as leader of the Hellenic League as well as leader of the Peloponnesus largely because of her prestige. But prestige is a fragile thing and confidence is easily dissipated; if Leonidas had gone to Thermopylae and lost his whole force there, or if he had suffered enormous casualties, Sparta's prestige might have dropped to the danger point. Had Leonidas been leading a force only of Lacedaemonians, he might have risked a retreat, for there was little to be lost by trying. But Leonidas commanded a mixed force, in two capacities. As leader of the Peloponnesian League, he had to see to it that his Peloponnesian allies got home safely, and that their confidence in Sparta remained unshaken. As commander of the Hellenic alliance against Persia, he had to vindicate Sparta's rôle as leader. So he sent back the Peloponnesians, but he stayed behind to make possible their safe retreat, and to maintain his state's prestige.

Such an hypothesis fits the Herodotean account. For, according to Herodotus, Leonidas was influenced by a variety of motives: he was concerned about his allies [7.220.1], he thought it improper for the Spartiates to leave their posts [7.220.1], he saw that the allies were unwilling to remain [7.220.2], he preferred to send them away rather than have them go of their own accord [7.220.5] and not least, he wanted glory for the Spartiates alone. He did not reject the assistance of the Thespians and the Thebans, but he was determined to maintain the prestige of Sparta. The idea of "keeping face" is a very ancient concept.²⁵

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²⁵ In this essay I have purposely passed over the theory of F. Miltner ("Pro Leonida," *Klio* 28 [1935-6] 228-241), who argued that Leonidas held the pass with a rearguard to prevent the Persian cavalry from seizing the Euripus and cutting off the retreat of the Greek fleet. This view has been adequately demolished by Dascalakis, *op.cit.* 71-75; and Hignett, *op.cit.* 378.