

CLCIV 375

Section 005

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Response Paper 1

Herodotus claimed that the Greek victory over the Achaemenid Empire was owed to Athens, stating, “Once they [the Athenians] had decided that their preference was for Greece to remain free, it was they who roused the rest of Greece...and, with the help of the gods, repelled the King’s advance” (Herodotus 7.139) and indeed, after reading his account, it is evident this is so.

The first way in which one can see this is with the Ionian revolt. Beginning in 499 BC, the Greek tyrant Aristagoras of Miletus lead the Greek colonies of Asia Minor in a rebellion against their Persian conquerors (Herodotus, *Histories* 5). Herodotus describes how these city-states united to do this, but even so, needed more support to claim victory. Aristagoras sailed to Sparta to plead for aid from its king Cleomenes but was soundly rejected. In another attempt, Aristagoras went to Athens; Claiming that the Ionians descended from the Athenians, Aristagoras was able to convince Athens to send 20 ships (Herodotus, *Histories*, 5.97). In this way, Athens was the first major power to act against the Persians.

Even with the Athenian aid though, the Ionians were defeated; This was not before earning the ire of Persian king Darius. Herodotus states that Athenian hoplites burned the city of Sardis, with Darius vowing, “O Zeus, grant me vengeance on the Athenians.” (Herodotus, *Histories* 5.105). Indeed, Persia invaded Greece to exact revenge upon Athens, which Artemesia 1st corroborates in book VIII, stating, “...you will be marching home after the

burning of Athens, which thing was the whole purpose of your expedition."

(Herodotus, *Histories* 8.102). Through the evidence presented, one can see Athens was not only a primary instigator for the war against Persia, but also the main reason for the Persians invading Greece. While Herodotus states, "It was they who roused the rest of Greece", one could understand this as not just through leadership and theatrics, but rather through necessity. Athens "poked the bear" and because of this, forced the Greeks to unite. While not as noble as Herodotus envisions, it is clear Athens was the major cause for the involvement of mainland Greece; Like Herodotus's quote, Athens both "decided that their preference was for Greece to remain free" and "roused the rest of Greece" to battle.

Another way to verify Herodotus's claim is by looking at the actions of the second most powerful city-state: Sparta. As previously stated, Sparta ignored the call to action by the Ionians but was also negligent during the battle of Marathon. Herodotus introduces this in Book IV, explaining that when a messenger came to rouse the Spartans, they wouldn't go due to scheduling conflicts with a festival (Herodotus, *Histories* 6.106). Indeed, after the festival, the Spartans eventually did leave, only to arrive after the battle had happened; They then "praised the Athenians" and promptly left (Herodotus, *Histories* 6.120). While Spartan Law was a sacred institution, Marathon revealed Sparta's attitude towards the rest of Greece: It was only interested in itself. Considering Athens sent ships to Ionia by itself, it wouldn't make sense to say Sparta "...roused the rest of Greece...".

One can further see the Spartan Attitude in Book VII, in which Herodotus theorizes what would have happened in the war without Athens. He predicted that the Spartans would build a series of walls across the Isthmus of Corinth, and the Persians being a naval power, would have sailed around them; Sparta's allies would flee, and the city-state would stand alone, allowing

Persia to win the war. (Herodotus, *Histories* 7.139). With this passage, Herodotus again reveals that the Spartans are self-interested; they had no intention of helping the other Greeks, but rather, wanted to self-isolate and protect their interests. As he said though, this ultimately would have failed, and it was only this understanding that compelled the Spartans to aid the other Greeks. Their preference wasn't for "Greece to remain free", but rather, to prevent their destruction.

Even after being forced to fight, Sparta had ulterior motives for liberty and beating Persia. Herodotus explores this in Book VII in which he describes Spartan king Leonidas's final stand at Thermopylae. In its final moments, Leonidas commanded his Greek allies to withdraw while dooming his Spartans to destruction, with Herodotus observing, "departure being for himself [Leonidas] not honorable; if he remained, he would leave a name of great renown and the prosperity of Sparta would not be blotted out." (Herodotus, *Histories* 7.220). From what is presented, the Spartans fought for prestige; Instead of saving his men and regrouping for a future engagement, Leonidas was more concerned with maintaining Sparta's identity and his glory. Herodotus yet again shows that the Spartans were solely concerned with their affairs, and truly, Sparta felt it had no stake in whether Greece was to "remain free". Athens was the de facto power that "rouse the rest of Greece" and led it against Persia.

Even if one was to compare the military accomplishments of the two city-states, one would see it was Athens who repelled the Persians. The first confrontation between the Greeks and Persians occurred at the Attic port of Marathon. It was the spearhead of Darius 1st retaliatory invasion of Greece, and Herodotus describes it in detail in Book VI; In summary, the Athenians routed the Persian expeditionary force on the beach, forcing the Persian navy further up the coast which Herodotus narrates as, "The foreign fleet lay a while off Phalerum, which was then the Athenians' arsenal; there they anchored and thence sailed away back to Asia."

(Herodotus, *Histories* 6.116). What made this battle important was that it forced the Persians to flee Greece, which they ultimately would not return to for another 10 years. As previously stated, the Spartans and other Greek powers were absent from the battle, meaning Athens claimed sole victory against Persia.

10 years after the battle of Marathon, the Persian king Xerxes took up the torch of his father and re-invaded Greece. While extraordinarily famous, Herodotus explained that the Spartan last stand at Thermopylae was ultimately an abject failure; The Persians found a flanking path, obliterated the Spartan forces, and proceeded to march to Athens (Herodotus, *Histories* 6.213-225) Thermopylae was an important contribution to the war, but Athens not only defeated Persia at Marathon but was about to do it a second time at Salamis. While the Persians were on the march to Athens, Herodotus narrates the Greeks retreating to the Island of Salamis. He claims they lured the Persian fleet into the narrow straits to reduce their numerical advantage, and using the Greek's superior ships, were able to trap, and then subsequently route the Persian navy. (Herodotus, *Histories* 8.66-85) This was an important battle, as it caused Xerxes to "plan flight" and withdraw himself and the majority of his forces from Europe (Herodotus, *Histories* 8.97). After the defeat at Thermopylae, Salamis was the turning point of the war for Greece, and considering, "it was the Athenians who furnished by far the most and the sea-worthiest ships." (Herodotus, *Histories* 8.42), it is only logical to give Athens the credit for the second major victory against Greece.

Through the evidence presented, one can see that Herodotus had good reason to claim the Greek victory over Persia belonged to Athens. Through their support of the Ionians, Athens proved "their preference was for Greece to remain free". Whether forced or not, the Persian invasion of retaliation ensured Athens "roused the rest of Greece", all while the Spartans proved

they had no desire to do so. Even in the heat of battle, Athens claimed the first, and major turning point victories in the war. Indeed, there is no other power that can claim they did as much for Greece as Athens, and as shown by the Peloponnesian War, Athens made sure to weaponize this.

Works Cited

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