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# LEONIDAS' DECISION<sup>1</sup>

R. HOPE SIMPSON

IN MANY DISCUSSIONS of the "Last Stand" at Thermopylae<sup>2</sup> it seems to be taken for granted that, after the rout of the Phocian contingent by Hydarnes and the Immortals, the Greeks immediately concluded that their position was desperate. Yet Herodotus records that they held a council at this point (7.219.2; cf. 7.220.1) as to *whether or not to leave the*

<sup>1</sup>I wish to thank Messrs. D. K. Hagel, J. F. Lazenby, A. J. Marshall, and F. M. Schroeder for suggestions, although they are not responsible for any views expressed. I am grateful also to Messrs. J. R. Grant and J. A. S. Evans for the stimulus provided by their works.

The following abbreviations of the titles of modern works have been used in this article: Bury—J. B. Bury, "The Campaign of Artemisium and Thermopylae," *BSA* 2 (1895–6) 83–104; How and Wells—W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* (Oxford 1928); Grant—J. R. Grant, "Leonidas' Last Stand," *Phoenix* 15 (1961) 14–27; Daskalakis—A. Daskalakis, *Problèmes historiques autour de la Bataille des Thermopyles* (Paris 1962); Burn—A. R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks: The Defence of the West c. 546–468 B.C.* (London 1962); Hignett—C. Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece* (Oxford 1963); Lazenby—J. F. Lazenby, "The Strategy of the Greeks in the Opening Campaign of the Persian War," *Hermes* 92 (1964) 264–284; Evans (1964)—J. A. S. Evans, "The Final Problem at Thermopylae," *GRBS* 5 (1964) 231–237; Immerwahr—H. R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Cleveland 1966); Evans (1969)—J. A. S. Evans, "Notes on Thermopylae and Artemisium," *Historia* 18 (1969) 389–406. For the topography of Thermopylae see W. K. Pritchett, "New Light on Thermopylae," *AJA* 62 (1958) 203–213 and P. A. Mackay, "Procopius' *De Aedificiis* and the topography of Thermopylae," *AJA* 67 (1963) 241–255. I have not made use of the following recent studies: A. Ferrill, "Herodotus and the Strategy and Tactics of the Invasion of Xerxes," *American Historical Review* 72 (1966–7) 102–115; H. Bengtson, *The Greeks and the Persians from the Sixth to the Fourth Centuries* (London 1968) 47–55; P. Green, *The Year of Salamis 480–479 B.C.* (London 1970). Ferrill's notes are not sufficiently specific, and Bengtson in a brief discussion adopts a conventional hypothesis (that the Greeks planned a defensive action on land coupled with an offensive at sea). Green, although providing some interesting modern and ancient parallels, achieves novelty only by a catholic admixture of post-Herodotean sources.

<sup>2</sup>In this paper argument both explicit and implicit is respectfully directed in particular against Grant's view of Leonidas, and accordingly against much of his reconstruction of the "Last Stand" itself. Evans (1964) seems to do greater justice to Herodotus' account, where the various motives given for Leonidas' decision are expressed in the usual paratactic form. Immerwahr separates the Thermopylae narrative into two "levels," the "pragmatic" and the "symbolic" (254–267, especially 261 f.; "The account of the battle at Thermopylae thus consists of two superimposed structures moving on two different levels"). But this presupposes an excessively complicated and sophisticated mode of construction. Immerwahr also greatly exaggerates the "parallelisms" with the Artemisium narrative. In general, it appears that he has here considerably overstepped the principles adopted by H. Fränkel, "Eine Stileigenheit der frühgriechischen Literatur," *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens*<sup>2</sup> (Munich 1960) 40–96.

*post*; and there is no evidence of panic following the receipt of the bad news.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for Leonidas' decision have been much discussed. Little attention, however, has been paid to the equally important question, why the troops were willing to follow his decision, and even less to the actual account of the last battle itself. In the argument below emphasis is laid on the fundamental, but often neglected, factors of timing and morale. Although Herodotus gives a characteristically dramatised presentation of the story, it is nevertheless possible for the most part to isolate the actual events from the dramatic embellishments. And Herodotus, although he does not, of course, pay much direct attention to the exact timings of the events or describe precisely the state of morale among the troops, nevertheless includes in his account most of the data from which an analysis can be made.

Herodotus' apparent acceptance (7.220.3–4) of the oracle to the Spartans (which is now usually taken to be a *vaticinium post eventum*) does not in itself imply an uncritical adherence to the tradition of the "Legend,"<sup>4</sup> with its implications of *devotio*, or self-sacrifice for his country, on the part of Leonidas. That Herodotus does not necessarily entertain the belief that Leonidas was faced with a straight choice between death and dishonour is suggested in particular by the use of the word *συνδιακινδυνεύειν* (7.220.2).<sup>5</sup> The whole Thermopylae-Artemisium scheme was indeed a calculated risk, in the face of an enemy of far greater strength.

The overwhelming numerical superiority of Xerxes' forces is rightly emphasized by Herodotus, however exaggerated the figures given. Little extra propaganda would be needed for those wavering as a further inducement to medism. It had been necessary for the Greeks to send a considerable force to Tempe, if only to forestall the treachery of the Aleuadae, and to discourage other Thessalians from following their example.<sup>6</sup> When Tempe had to be abandoned, for sound tactical reasons,<sup>7</sup> and with it all of Thessaly, the Greek League could even less afford the loss of manpower that would result if Central Greece were forced to choose between medism and annihilation. Even now two major states, Argos and Thebes, both embraced a neutrality tending towards hostility.<sup>8</sup> The difficulty was to find enough loyal troops both to guard the Peloponnese and to retain control of Central Greece. The obvious and

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Evans (1964) 236 n. 24.

<sup>4</sup>Hignett 124–126 and Appendix IV; cf. Evans (1964) 231 f.

<sup>5</sup>The verb recurs at Pl. *Lach.* 189b, where Laches is reminding Socrates of how they had together survived the dangers of Delium (cf. *Symp.* 220e–221c). It appears to be a rare word (in contrast to the simpler compounds *συγκινδυνεύω* and *διακινδυνεύω*), and seems to be chosen very deliberately, if not actually coined, by Herodotus.

<sup>6</sup>Hdt. 7.6, 7.172.2–3; cf. Lazenby 269.

<sup>7</sup>Hdt. 7.173.4; cf. Lazenby, *loc. cit.*

<sup>8</sup>Hdt. 7.205.2–3 (Thebes), cf. Hignett 18 f., 117 f.; Hdt. 7.148–152, 8.73.3, 9.12 (Argos), cf. Hignett 100 f., 279 f., 440 f.

only solution was to guard the Thermopylae Pass, which required only a moderate force of hoplites, provided that the sea flank were secured.<sup>9</sup>

At first glance the group sent to Thermopylae from the Peloponnese seems oddly chosen. Although the Spartiates were specially selected,<sup>10</sup> they were few in number, while on the other hand there were more Arcadians than those who subsequently fought at Plataea.<sup>11</sup> But it may be possible to account for some, at least, of the peculiarities. The scheme relied also on the addition of as many additional troops as possible from the Central Greek states. Leonidas' recruiting campaign met with as much success as could be expected.<sup>12</sup> The Phocians and Locrians responded fully;<sup>13</sup> but of the Boeotians only the men of Thespieae volunteered,<sup>14</sup> and a small contingent was sent from Thebes.<sup>15</sup> A contingent might have been expected from Athens,<sup>16</sup> although the Athenians (like the Plataeans) were supplying marines for the fleet,<sup>17</sup> and some troops may have been needed to maintain order in Attica during the preliminary stages of the evacuation.<sup>18</sup> It may also have been necessary for Athens to retain sufficient hoplites to deal with any threat which might develop from medizing

<sup>9</sup>Evans (1969), especially 390 f. and 405 f., rightly argues that the rôle of the fleet was subordinate to that of the army.

<sup>10</sup>Hdt. 7.205.2. How and Wells, *ad loc.*, say that the Three Hundred were selected from men who had children "so that even if they perished, no family might become extinct" (cf. Burn 378). This would indeed be a fine addition to the *devotio* motif; but Herodotus gives no such explanation; and, as Hignett suggests (124–126), the reference to "fathers of families" may itself reflect the influence of the "Legend;" i.e., it may be a *post eventum* addition to the story. If it is true, then it is possible that Leonidas (like Gideon) adopted a method which would enable him to choose simply and quickly a band of *mature* men, with something to lose. That the Three Hundred were not merely a royal bodyguard is shown by Hdt. 6.56, where the King's bodyguard in the field is said to be 100 picked men (cf. Burn 378 n. 1, though one must reject his conjecture "100 always on duty?").

<sup>11</sup>Lazenby 270 f.

<sup>12</sup>Hdt. 7.202–203; cf. 7.207, 7.232 (the Spartiate sent to Thessaly; cf. Evans [1969] 394).

<sup>13</sup>Diodorus (Ephorus[?]) *ap.* Diod. 11.4.6–7) adds 1,000 Malians, but Hignett, 18 f. and 117 f., argues against this. There may have been some Malians acting as "local allies" in the manner suggested by Burn (380); but, if so, they certainly failed to give any warning of the ascent of the Immortals.

<sup>14</sup>They were commanded by Demophilos, son of Diadromes (Hdt. 7.222). Burn (419) erroneously describes the hero Dithyrambos as their leader.

<sup>15</sup>These may have been opposed to the pro-Persian party in Thebes, as Diodorus says (Ephorus[?]) *ap.* Diod. 11.4.7; cf. Daskalakis 59 and 61 f., Evans [1964] 236 f.; but Hignett 18 f., 118 *contra*, or perhaps a "token" force sent by a Thebes wavering on the brink of medism (but cf. Lazenby 271 and n. 2).

<sup>16</sup>Evans (1969) 394; cf. Hignett 118.

<sup>17</sup>Hdt. 8.1.1. Most contributing states provided men *either* for the fleet *or* for the army; cf. Hignett 114 f.

<sup>18</sup>Lazenby (264–268) resolves the supposed discrepancy between the Troizen Decree and Hdt. 8.41.1 by pointing out that, whereas the Decree ordered evacuation *before* Thermopylae, some Athenians may not have complied until after Thermopylae (cf. Evans [1969] 391, 402).

Boeotians. A similar consideration must almost certainly have necessitated the retention in the Peloponnese of sufficient Spartiates to counter any hostile move by Argos. Despite the difficulties, there are several indications that as full an effort as possible was being made at Thermopylae and Artemisium to stop the Persians.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the despatch of a Spartan king, and of the greater part of the Greek fleet, the proportionately large numbers of the Arcadians may here be significant. Furthermore, if the gamble succeeded, and Thermopylae were actually to be held for a sufficient length of time, then Xerxes would surely have been forced to order a retreat, for lack of food and water.<sup>20</sup>

On first taking up their position at Thermopylae, however, the morale of the Greek infantry was definitely low (Hdt. 7.207), as was at first also that of the Greek sailors at Artemisium.<sup>21</sup> But in the first two days of the fighting at Thermopylae the Greeks managed to repel, and to inflict considerable casualties upon, every unit of the Persian army sent against them successively in the frontal assault, including even the Immortals. Leonidas had made his dispositions simply, keeping most of his force together at the pass, grouped in their national units in the normal manner, and posting only the Phocians (who knew the terrain, and had besides volunteered for the duty [Hdt. 7.217.2]) to guard the Anopaia path.<sup>22</sup> There was no particular reason to expect that the Phocians would prove unreliable.<sup>23</sup> And it may be presumed that the Greeks did not expect that any but light-armed Persian troops would attempt the difficult and

<sup>19</sup>Hignett (113 f.), Lazenby (269–271), and Evans (1969) 393–395, 399 all argue that this was not merely a delaying action, and Lazenby points out that the size of the fleet alone shows this.

<sup>20</sup>F. Maurice, *JHS* 50 (1930) 210–235; cf. Evans (1969) 400–402. The Persian army and fleet could not stay too long in any one area. It is worth noting that the same considerations apply in the case of Salamis, which would help to explain why Xerxes so obligingly fell in with Themistocles' "ruse."

<sup>21</sup>Lazenby 273 f.

<sup>22</sup>Evans (1969) 394 unduly emphasizes Leonidas' discovery of the existence of the unexpected path, and attributes the initial "fright" of the Greeks largely to this cause. It seems much more likely that their natural apprehension was due to their first encounter with the Persian strength face to face. Hignett (118 f.) comments that the calculations of the numbers needed "may indeed have been upset by the need to detach 1,000 hoplites to guard the Anopaia, but Herodotus does not suggest that this force was too small for its task, or that the men retained by Leonidas were too few for the defence of the main pass;" cf. Lazenby 271. Evans (1969) 390, 393–395 also argues that the force at Thermopylae was sufficient, provided that the position was not outflanked, and that casualties were replaced by reinforcements.

<sup>23</sup>Hignett (142) maintains that "the path was difficult for an army, and ought to have been easy to guard." And the Phocians had much to lose if the Persians broke through, as is shown by the sequel (Hdt. 8.27–35) when, at the instigation of the Thessalians, the Persians sacked the Phocian cities. Both Hignett (141) and Burn (418) suggest that Leonidas should have posted some Spartans with the Phocians. But the idea of attaching élite troops and officers (advisers?) to less professional national contingents seems too modern.

circuitous path. Unfortunately Xerxes, with his superior knowledge of the niceties of mountain warfare, elected to send his most heavily armed detachment, who were also equipped as archers. The Greeks could hardly have foreseen such tactics, but they were clearly aware of the threat of encirclement in general; and there is no good reason to suppose that they would immediately lose their newly gained morale on the first news of the approach of the Immortals.<sup>24</sup> Too much attention has been paid to Herodotus' "first version"<sup>25</sup> (7.219.2, with 7.220.4 *ἀκόσμως οἴχεσθαι*) of the Greek reaction to the news, which is taken, perhaps wrongly, as implying downright desertion on the part of most of the Peloponnesians. Herodotus clearly rejects the worst implications of this malicious gossip.<sup>26</sup> But, in attempting at least a partial harmonisation between this less creditable version and the "second version" which he accepts, namely that Leonidas sent the Peloponnesians back to ensure their safety (7.220.1 *μὴ ἀπόλωνται κηδόμενος*; cf. 7.228.1 *ἀποπεμφθέντας οἴχεσθαι*), Herodotus cautiously and uncharacteristically ventures his own explanation (*ταύτη καὶ μᾶλλον τὴν γνώμην πλείστός εἰμι*) that, when Leonidas saw that they were lacking in zeal and unwilling to share the risks to the end (*συνδιακινδυνεύειν*), he thereupon sent them back, rather than have them go of their own accord (7.220.2, with 7.220.4). That there was clearly no official blame or stigma<sup>27</sup> attached to the Peloponnesians subsequently (cf. Hdt. 7.228.1) further corroborates Herodotus' "second version," with or without his harmonisation.

Unfortunately, in concentrating on the alleged motives of Leonidas, Herodotus fails to discuss the more positive military considerations affecting his decision. Leonidas' assignment was presumably to hold the pass for as long as possible, whether or not reinforcements were to be expected,<sup>28</sup> provided that the fleet was also able to remain and thereby

<sup>24</sup>*Pace* the supposed forebodings of the seer Megistias (Hdt. 7.219.1; cf. Hignett 372).

<sup>25</sup>Especially by Grant (16). Hignett (372 f.) puts this in true perspective, and correctly dismisses Beloch's contention that there was no time for an orderly retreat.

<sup>26</sup>Hignett 373: "A version so discreditable to the mass of the Peloponnesians probably originated in one of the Central Greek states and may even have been current at Athens." In fact an *Athenian* origin appears very likely.

<sup>27</sup>Grant, however, accepts (25 f.) this "first version," and explains the lack of stigma as resulting from a kind of higher obedience on the part of the Peloponnesians to a (hypothetical) set of instructions to Leonidas from the Spartans, somehow designed to limit his freedom of action. But no such instructions could have covered the totally new tactical situation.

<sup>28</sup>Since the Greeks had not expected the battle of Thermopylae to be over so soon (Hdt. 7.206.2), we can never know (*pace* Evans [1969] 394 f.) whether or not the Spartans at home (Hdt. 7.206) or Leonidas on his recruiting campaign (Hdt. 7.203.1) were sincere in their assertions that his force was only an advance-guard. Lazenby (270 f.; but cf. Daskalakis 40–45, 89 f. *contra*) argues that the religious scruples concerning the Carneian and Olympic Games were sincere. The question is fully discussed by Hignett 117–127; cf. Evans (1969), *loc.cit.*

secure the flank.<sup>29</sup> He would surely not have received any precise instructions (if indeed it was possible at this time to give instructions to a Spartan king on matters of warfare) concerning the tactical methods to be employed, let alone the exact procedure to be followed if the pass were to be circumvented by land and his force endangered. Leonidas was now faced with the necessity of making a difficult choice quickly, so as to make full use of the short space of time before the Immortals would have descended and begun to take up their position.<sup>30</sup> There were three main alternatives:

1. He could presumably try to maintain the position with his whole force, and continue a difficult, but perhaps not impossible, fight on two fronts.<sup>31</sup> But, even if the pass could still be held in this manner, the supply problem would have limited the duration of the action, and the Greeks would still subsequently have been forced to make their inevitable retreat under much more difficult circumstances.

2. All the Greeks could immediately retreat together. But they would then inevitably be exposed not only to the Persian and Thessalian cavalry, but also to light-armed troops who could be detached from Xerxes' main force to harass them. And the initial retreat would, of course, have to be made in full view of the enemy, since the opportunity of a withdrawal by night was now lost.<sup>32</sup> If they subsequently dispersed in groups (cf. Hdt.

<sup>29</sup>H. Last, *CR* 57 (1943) 63–66, stresses the penalty for failure; cf. Evans (1964) 236 n. 23, (1969) 391.

<sup>30</sup>The full news of the rout of the Phocians arrived just after dawn (Hdt. 7.219.1–2; cf. Evans [1964] 233 f.). Xerxes' advance was made "at the time when the market place is most crowded" (Hdt. 7.233.1). The Immortals arrived towards the end of the battle. Daskalakis (75 f., 163–167 [cf. 186 f.]) suggests a rough time scheme as follows:

- 5.0 a.m., the rout of the Phocians
- 6.0 a.m., or shortly after, the arrival of the full news
- 7.0 a.m., the Greek assembly
- between 9.0 a.m. and 10.0 a.m., Xerxes' advance
- 11.0 a.m., the arrival of the Immortals.

He concludes that by mid-day all was over.

These timings, although hypothetical, seem in the main acceptable. Possibly the interval suggested between the arrival of the news and the Greek assembly is somewhat long. The Greeks may have been by constitution slow to assemble, but presumably only the leaders would have been called to the council, and the contingents would not have been widely dispersed, in the small area involved. Surely also everyone concerned would by now have been wide awake and expecting a meeting.

<sup>31</sup>That this alternative was actually considered, however briefly, is implied by Hdt. 7.219.2. But Bury's elaborate theory (*op. cit.* and *A History of Greece*<sup>3</sup> [London 1956] 275 f.) that the Peloponnesian contingents were sent back by Leonidas to try themselves to encircle the encircling Immortals, is given too much credit for rationality by Grant (15 f.). The theory is followed in part also by How and Wells (376 f.). For the overwhelming counter-arguments see Pritchett, *AJA* 62 (1958) 211 n. 8, Burn 417 n. 23, Hignett 374–376, and Evans (1964) 233.

<sup>32</sup>Daskalakis 76 f. But Burn (418) exaggerates in claiming that the Thessalian cavalry "would have rounded up the whole army in the open within the day;" cf. Hignett 127 (especially the comments on the Mendenitza—Elateia route).

219.2 . . . διασκεδασθέντες κατὰ πόλιν ἕκαστοι . . .) or fled singly,<sup>33</sup> they would face further danger from medizing Boeotians through whose lands they had to travel.<sup>34</sup> Above all, whether they dispersed or remained together, such a retreat would have shattered the morale of troops who had hitherto enjoyed complete success in battle.

3. The force could be divided, leaving a rearguard, whose duty would be to delay the main Persian army for a sufficient time to allow a head start for the majority of the Greeks to make an orderly retreat.<sup>35</sup> This was clearly the best solution and, whether or not considerations of prestige<sup>36</sup> or pique<sup>37</sup> provided further motivation, it is a tribute mainly to the good tactical judgement of Leonidas that he made this choice.

The next question to be faced by Leonidas, in his capacity as commander-in-chief of a mixed force,<sup>38</sup> was precisely how to divide his troops. Herodotus rightly insists that he was concerned for the safety of his allies, and he presumably wished to save as many of them as possible. It was also necessary, for this same objective, to place some reliable troops both with the rearguard and with the retreating force (and the unforeseen rout of the Phocians was a recent reminder of this necessity). For the rearguard, Spartan prestige no doubt determined their selection (cf. Hdt. 7.220.1). But could the Spartans alone hold the pass effectively?<sup>39</sup> In the first two days of battle the Greeks had fought in their national contingents *in relays* (Hdt. 7.212.2 οἱ δὲ Ἕλληνες κατὰ τάξιν τε καὶ κατὰ ἔθνη κεκοσμημένοι ἦσαν καὶ ἐν μέρει ἕκαστοι ἐμάχοντο). For success, the defence had to be aggressive, using to the full the cohesion and the weight of the hoplite formation.<sup>40</sup> Such an aggressive defence in turn presupposes the build-up of fatigue, and therefore the need for constant relief of the front-line troops. Only one hoplite contingent would scarcely have been sufficient. Thus it can be

<sup>33</sup>Daskalakis (77 f.) argues that the *Spartan* unwritten code at least forbade abject flight in the face of the enemy; cf. Evans (1964) 235.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Hdt. 8.34. A "fifth column" of Macedonian agents was already at work in Boeotia. Leonidas had been at pains to counter the effects of this activity (Hdt. 7.203.1, 7.206; cf. Hignett 120 f., Evans [1969] 394 f.).

<sup>35</sup>For this "rearguard" solution cf. especially Daskalakis 76–78, Burn 417 f., Evans (1964) 235 f. Grant (17 f.) rightly rejects Munro's theory (in *CAH*) that the rearguard was left in order to give the Greek fleet "one day more" for a decisive battle. Grant also points out (20), in rebuttal of Miltner's hypothesis ("Pro Leonida," *Klio* 28 [1935] 228–241), that the fleet would still have had time to retreat through the Euripus even if the Persian cavalry were able to arrive there shortly ahead of them (cf. Daskalakis 71–75, Hignett 378, Evans [1964] 237 n. 25). In general, it is clear that, although the Thermopylae and Artemisium positions were *strategically* interdependent, no effective *tactical* coordination between them could be expected.

<sup>36</sup>Evans (1964) 236 f.

<sup>37</sup>Grant, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Evans (1964) 237.

<sup>39</sup>Grant (19) seems to assume that this was a possibility. A recent film version, "The Three Hundred Spartans," has exploited the idea, thereby creating a new myth.

<sup>40</sup>How and Wells 401 f.



argued that the three contingents selected, comprising perhaps 2,000 men, including the Helots,<sup>41</sup> may have been the *minimum* necessary to hold the pass, even for the relatively short period needed, against the massive onslaught that could be expected.

Besides the Spartans, which of the others should Leonidas choose? We might have expected the Tegeans, who were subsequently placed next to the Spartans on the right wing at Plataea (Hdt. 9.26.1, 9.28.3). But this contingent would be especially needed for defence of the Peloponnese, and besides would serve to give the necessary cohesion to the retreating party. And the obvious choice among the remainder for the rearguard were those who had the most to lose if the Persians should break through immediately and prematurely, namely the Theban and Thespian contingents.<sup>42</sup> Naturally it would not be possible to *compel* them to engage in such a risky operation. Even if their cities were destined for either destruction or medism, the men themselves could have retired to the Peloponnese, to continue the fight later. The Thespians clearly stayed voluntarily. And Herodotus' story of the supposed coercion of the Thebans is generally acknowledged to be derived from anti-Theban propaganda, circulated after Thebes medized.<sup>43</sup> Herodotus does not deny Theban participation in the first stage of the "Last Stand."<sup>44</sup> And the fact that the Thebans who

<sup>41</sup>With the Spartiates there were naturally some Helots (Hdt. 8.25.1). But whether these were "emancipated Helots, armed as Hoplites" (Burn 378 f.) is quite uncertain, and Burn's suggested total of 900 Helots seems high in any case. The exceptionally large number of Helots sent to Plataea cannot be cited as a relevant parallel since, when nearly all the Spartiates were sent to the battle, it would have been dangerous to leave the Helots at home (cf. Hignett 279 f., Daskalakis 19–22). It is possible that some perioeci were also present at the "Last Stand" (cf. Grant 26 n. 46, Hignett 116 f.). But Isoc. (*Paneg.* 90) and the source (Ephorus ?) of Diodorus 11.4.5 may have been misguidedly attempting to make up the Peloponnesian force to the number supposedly claimed in the epitaph (Hdt. 7.228.1 *ἐκ Πελοποννάσου χιλιάδες τέτορες*; cf. Lazenby 270). And the 4,000 given as the total of the Greek dead (Hdt. 8.25.2) of course included also Thebans and Thespians. The epitaph, being in verse, could hardly be expected to give a precise record of those who took part. And it would naturally have omitted the Phocians and Thebans. As for the gallant Thespians (Lazenby 269 f.), their reputation presumably had to suffer for the sins of the other Boeotians (cf. Hdt. 8.34 *Βοιωτῶν δὲ πᾶν τὸ πλῆθος ἐμήδιζε*).

<sup>42</sup>Burn (417 f.) suggests that Leonidas may have regarded the Thebans and Thespians as expendable. But, apart from the overall need for loyal troops, it seems unlikely that he would have regarded the Thespians in this light, whatever he thought of the Thebans (cf. Immerwahr 262, concerning a supposed Herodotean antithesis of Theban and Thespian conduct).

<sup>43</sup>Plutarch (*De Malignitate Herodoti* 31) correctly argued that the only sure way of dealing with supposedly reluctant Thebans would have been to send them south with the departing Peloponnesians (cf. Burn 417 f., Evans [1964] 236 n. 24, and see above, n. 15).

<sup>44</sup>Daskalakis (83–85) suggests that the Thebans were *at this stage* left at or near the Phocian Wall, to confront the Immortals when they came down. But it was surely unnecessary to waste troops on such a duty until the threat actually materialised. The *ήμεροσκόποι* presumably continued to watch and report on Hydarnes' movements.

surrendered during the last stage of the battle were branded with Xerxes' royal mark (reserved for the lowest form of slave) shows that *he* was unimpressed, to say the least, by the timing of their "medism." In short, what must be explained is the *acceptance* by the Thebans, the Thespians, and indeed by the Spartans, of their rôle as a rearguard. Whether or not the position was actually hopeless, the main point is, what the troops themselves thought about it; i.e., what the state of their morale was at the time. That the Greeks did not regard the outcome as a foregone conclusion is apparently shown also by the fact that the messenger ship, under the Athenian Abronichus, did not sail for Artemisium until the fighting was over (Hdt. 8.21).<sup>45</sup>

The task of the rearguard was extremely hazardous, but it did not entail the "certain death"<sup>46</sup> that has often been assumed. Ideally they must continue their (hitherto successful) defence of the pass against the main Persian army for the short time required, and in such a manner as to discourage immediate pursuit when they themselves retreated or fled (presumably even the Spartan "unwritten code" would not forbid flight after such a brave venture, voluntarily undertaken and successfully endured). And this result must, of course, be achieved before the Immortals descended. Moreover, it must be remembered that the latter, tired from their all night march, would be in no condition to begin immediately the pursuit of a fleeing rearguard. But it is to be doubted whether the Greek soldiers themselves had either the imagination or the time to consider the odds against a successful extrication. The point at issue is not whether their survival was actually possible, but whether their morale was high enough to match Leonidas' lead (and, if the Peloponnesians had really deserted, it is difficult to believe that the Spartans and Thespians, let alone the Thebans, could have been persuaded to stay<sup>47</sup>).

Their extraordinarily high morale, misrepresented in the "Legend" version as a kind of fatalism (Hdt. 7.223.2 *ὡς τὴν ἐπὶ θανάτῳ ἕξοδον ποιούμενοι*; 7.223.3 *ἅτε γὰρ ἐπιστάμενοι τὸν μέλλοντα σφίσι ἕσσεσθαι θάνατον*), is amply demonstrated in the account of the "Last Stand" itself. Particularly important and interesting here is the fact (usually ignored by commentators) that *Xerxes attacked first*, and that he began his advance *before the Immortals were in position*. And the attack was made in strength, not by relays of contingents as previously. There is indeed a sharp contrast between this full onslaught and Xerxes' former tactics. In the first two days of fighting it is clear (despite some elaborations in Herodotus' account) that Xerxes had been mainly concerned with probing the Greek defence, attempting to wear down his heavily equipped opponents by continuous pressure (Hdt. 7.212.1), and also testing his own troops in succession, while

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Grant 26.

<sup>46</sup>Evans (1964) 236; cf. Daskalakis 84.

<sup>47</sup>"Panic is contagious" (Evans [1964] 236 n. 24).

he looked for a way of turning the Greek position.<sup>48</sup> There was, of course, a slender chance that a simple frontal attack might succeed, but although Xerxes may have *hoped* that the Greeks would run away he could hardly have expected it (*ἐλπίζων* at Hdt. 7.210.1 must be construed accordingly).

Why then did Xerxes on the last day begin his frontal attack before the Immortals had descended? Either it was impossible to coordinate his advance with Hydarnes' manoeuvre because of communication difficulties<sup>49</sup> (and the Greeks seem to have received the news of the Immortals' success some time before the Persians did—compare Hdt. 7.219.1 with 7.223.1), or else Xerxes' early advance was made on purpose, perhaps to “pin down” the Greeks remaining in the pass, until the Immortals could close the trap. But, whatever Xerxes' reason was, to the Greeks such a general advance, assisted by the whips<sup>50</sup> of the Persian captains (Hdt. 7.223.2), must have seemed a golden opportunity for inflicting further casualties on their more lightly armed opponents.<sup>51</sup> And, since a passive defence would in any case have been fatal, they responded with a resumption of their well tried aggressive defence tactics. But in their enthusiasm they advanced further than usual, into the broader part of the pass. This enthusiasm,<sup>52</sup> itself an expression of their high morale, almost resulted in a considerable victory,<sup>53</sup> such as was in fact needed if they were to “buy time” for their own escape. But it also led to the death of Leonidas, a serious blow to the confidence of men who must have been experiencing the utmost battle fatigue, exacerbated by the more gruelling hand-to-hand combat, after most of their spears had been broken. Indeed by now the fighting had been too fierce and protracted to leave much energy for flight. Xerxes, whether by accident or design, had managed to draw most of the

<sup>48</sup>According to Herodotus (7.213.1), when Xerxes was at a loss as to how to break the deadlock, Ephialtes appeared opportunely and *of his own accord* with the solution. Clearly some allowance must be made here for the dramatisation.

<sup>49</sup>Apparently the only means available to Xerxes for determining the rate of march of the Immortals was the estimate of Ephialtes that the route down the mountain would be easier and quicker than the route up (Hdt. 7.223.1). Possibly either Ephialtes or Xerxes (or both) miscalculated the (greater) length of time needed for a large body of men on a narrow track.

<sup>50</sup>The use of whips does not imply that cowardice was expected, but was intended simply to ensure continuous forward movement in the confined space; cf. Hdt. 7.56.1, where Herodotus merely relates (without emphasis or further comment) that the crossing of the Hellespont was made *ὑπὸ μαστίγων*, implying that there was nothing abnormal about this in the circumstances.

<sup>51</sup>Contrast the previous tactics designed to lure the enemy into attacking (Hdt. 7.211.3).

<sup>52</sup>Grant, however, categorises their action as “Leonidas' headlong attack” (26), “Leonidas' impetuous attack” (18), and “his reckless attack on the Persians” (19).

<sup>53</sup>That Persian losses were high, both in quantity and quality, is evidenced not only by the casualties listed by Herodotus, but also by Xerxes' vicious and uncharacteristic reprisals on the dead Leonidas (cf. Daskalakis 86 f.).

Greeks into a *mêlée*. When finally the news came of the impending arrival of the Immortals, the Thebans (or some of them?) understandably “threw in the sponge,” and the remaining Greeks, having to resort to a more passive defence, were inevitably overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the Persian numbers, which Xerxes could at last use effectively. At this point mercy could hardly be expected.<sup>54</sup>

Thus the heroism of the Greeks at Thermopylae was real, and not a mere unreasoning self-sacrifice born of a fatalistic desperation. And a Spartan king must be absolved of the scandalous charge of unnecessarily and wilfully<sup>55</sup> throwing away the lives of a complete rearguard, including his own hand-picked band of Spartiates. Above all, Leonidas did not disobey Spartan orders.<sup>56</sup> The risks he faced were admittedly great, and the outcome of the battle went against him; but, with a difficult choice in front of him, Leonidas made the right decision, and for the right reasons. And by so doing he managed not only to uphold the morale of his own troops, and also to demoralise further the enemy infantry, but (together with those Greeks who conquered their own fear at Artemisium<sup>57</sup>) helped to confirm and strengthen the Greek resistance as a whole. The Thermopylae “Legend” was not entirely propaganda.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Burn (420) comments on the slaughter of some of the Thebans who attempted to surrender, “in the heat of the battle, not all who dropped their weapons and ‘went forward with outstretched hands’ were spared.”

<sup>55</sup>Grant's picture of Leonidas as repressed and somewhat paranoid goes far beyond the very limited evidence available (cf. Grant 23, “much is dark . . .” and 24, “it is hazardous to guess . . .,” etc.). Grant tries extremely hard to give him some kind of character, but the plain fact is that Leonidas emerges into the limelight once and once only (Grant 24, “. . . Leonidas unheard of till his command at Thermopylae.”).

<sup>56</sup>According to Grant's view, the “Simonidean” epitaph (Hdt. 7.228.2) would presumably be a verse expression of some sort of posthumous free pardon to Leonidas for his disobedience.

<sup>57</sup>Lazenby 279 f.

<sup>58</sup>Cf. Burn 421 f.