



Здружение на класични филолози АНТИКА

# *Exegi monumentum aere perennius*

Зборник во чест на Елена Колева, Љубинка  
Басотова и Даница Чадиковска, по повод 85  
години од нивното раѓање

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Papers in Honor of Professor Elena Koleva, Professor  
Ljubinka Basotova and Professor Danica Čadikovska  
on the Occasion of the 85th Anniversary of Their Birth

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## **How to Etch a Philhellene: Alexander I, Herodotus and historiography as a tool**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of the paper is to re-evaluate the role and importance of Alexander I during the Persian invasion of Greece, particularly pertaining the embassy to Athens and the night visit before the battle of Plataea. It is maintained that his role and importance in the back-door dealings between the Athenians and Spartans while he was at Athens is probably exaggerated; while at the same time, in overstepping his role as an envoy of Mardonius, he had in fact harmed his reputation as benefactor and friend of Athens. Concerning the visit before Plataea, there is admittedly a certain pro-Macedonian nuance in the narrative; yet, this does not mean that it should be treated as a standalone affair, separated from the rest of the narrative, but rather in context of a much larger piece of propaganda which aims to glorify the deeds of Athens at the expense of

the Spartan ones – certainly not as an example of an *interpretatio Macedonica*.

*Key words: Herodotus, Athens, Sparta, Plataea, Alexander the Philhellene, propaganda.*

1. We begin our disposition of events in the immediate aftermath of the glorious Athenian victory at Salamis, which caused unexpected trouble for the Persian expeditionary force.<sup>1</sup> After failing to knock Athens out of the war once and for all, the Persians now had to send away the remaining naval force in order to safeguard the access to Asia Minor,<sup>2</sup> with the previously underestimated Athenian fleet becoming a centerpiece of the Athenian war effort. Herodotus has Mardonius waiting with close to 60,000 troops, including an additional 40,000 that Artabazus had brought from Potidaea on his demand; the numbers comprised close to 20,000 pro-Persian Greeks, who could not be entirely trusted for obvious reasons. The Persians were well aware that the Peloponnesians had been fortifying the Isthmus – meaning that, should they be unable to make the defenders surrender, their only remaining chance would be to bypass the Isthmus by sea. We cannot tell why Xerxes' fleet – reduced to 300 vessels, but obviously still a respectable force – remained at Samos, making no move towards mainland Greece. Herodotus would have us believe that this indolence was due to low morale; but having in mind how things were unfolding in Greece, it is more likely that the Persians feared the possibility of a new Ionian revolt. Be that as it may, at that time, the Greeks had no idea whether the fleet would make a move or not.

Across the sea, public sentiment in Athens was ambiguous, bordering on fickle. The great victory of Themistocles may have saved Peloponnese and brought him appropriate honours from the Spartans; his victory, however, meant nothing for Athens. Many Athenians saw the only hope for their city in a settlement with the Persians. Though many contested the mere idea of such a move, Themistocles lost the impending

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed overview of the political games of the two warring parties, as well as an analysis of the political situation in Athens, v. Barron (1988) 582-583.

<sup>2</sup> Diod. 11.27.1.

elections; the posts of *strategoi* went to Aristеides (cynically described as “the brother of Datis” on an ostrakon<sup>3</sup>) and Xanthippus, a son-in-law of the Alcmaeonidae, the traitors of Marathon.<sup>4</sup>

Apparently, neither side was overly disposed to fight. Mardonius must have thought this was a favorable moment for achieving through diplomacy what could not be done on the frontline: namely, ending the war with Athens, if not with a decisive victory, then at least with a favourable political deal. Eliminating Athens from the list of opponents would mark the end of the joint Greek war effort: without Athenian help, with Sparta focused mainly on its own fortunes, the other *poleis* would have no other choice but unconditional surrender; accordingly, the task of Mardonius would be successfully completed.

In order to attain this, during the winter 480/79 BC, Mardonius sent to Athens an envoy with a peace offer. This envoy was Alexander I, the king of Macedon: a brother-in-law of a Persian aristocrat, a faithful ally and a subject of the King, but also a *πρόξενος* and *εὐεργέτης* of the Athenians. Herodotus recounts the episode, including the purported speech of Alexander:

Ἐγεγόνεε μὲν δὴ ὧδε Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Ἀμύντεω. Ὡς δὲ  
ἀπίκετο ἐς τὰς Ἀθήνας ἀποπεμφθεὶς ὑπὸ Μαρδονίου,  
ἔλεγε τάδε· Ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, Μαρδόνιος τάδε λέγει·  
Ἔμοι ἀγγελίη ἦκει παρὰ βασιλέος λέγουσα ὧδε·  
Ἀθηναίοισι τὰς ἀμαρτάδας τὰς ἐς ἐμὲ ἐξ ἐκείνων  
γενομένας πάσας μετήμι. Νῦν τε ὧδε, Μαρδόνιε,  
ποιεε· τοῦτο μὲν τὴν γῆν σφι ἀπόδος, τοῦτο δὲ ἄλλην  
πρὸς ταύτην ἐλέσθων αὐτοί, ἦντινα ἂν ἐθέλωσι, ἐόντες  
αὐτόνομοι· ἱρά τε πάντα σφι, ἦν δὴ βούλωνται γε ἐμοὶ  
ὁμολογέειν, ἀνόρθωσον, ὅσα ἐγὼ ἐνέπρησα. Τούτων δὲ  
ἀπιγμένων ἀναγκαίως ἔχει μοι ποιέειν ταῦτα, ἦν μὴ τὸ  
ὑμέτερον ἀντίον γένηται. Λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν τάδε. Νῦν τί  
μαίνεσθε πόλεμον βασιλεῖ ἀειρόμενοι; Οὔτε γὰρ ἂν

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<sup>3</sup> V. McMullin (2001) 63. The text of the ostrakon remains problematic, but we generally agree with McMullin that “Aristeides’ prominent position in Timocreon’s poem leads [to speculation] about a possible connection between his ostracism and a charge of medizing” *Contra* Robertson (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hdt. 6.115; 6.121, 123.

ὑπερβάλαισθε οὔτε οἰοί τέ ἐστε ἀντέχειν τὸν πάντα χρόνον. Εἶδετε μὲν γὰρ τῆς Ξέρξεω στρατηλασίας τὸ πλῆθος καὶ τὰ ἔργα, πυνθάνεσθε δὲ καὶ τὴν νῦν παρ' ἐμοὶ ἐοῦσαν δύναμιν, ὥστε καὶ ἦν ἡμέας ὑπερβάλησθε καὶ νικήσητε, τοῦ περ ὑμῖν οὐδεμία ἐλπίς εἴ περ εὖ φρονέετε, ἄλλη παρέσται πολλαπλησίη. Μὴ ὦν βούλεσθε παρισύμενοι βασιλεῖ στέρεσθαι μὲν τῆς χώρας, θεῖν δὲ αἰεὶ περὶ ὑμέων αὐτῶν, ἀλλὰ καταλύσασθε· παρέχει δὲ ὑμῖν κάλλιστα καταλύσασθαι, βασιλέος ταύτη ὀρμημένου. Ἔστε ἐλεύθεροι, ἡμῖν ὁμαιχμίην συνθέμενοι ἄνευ τε δόλου καὶ ἀπάτης. Μαρδόνιος μὲν ταῦτα, ὦ Ἀθηναῖοι, ἐνετείλατό μοι εἰπεῖν πρὸς ὑμέας. Ἐγὼ δὲ περὶ μὲν εὐνοίης τῆς πρὸς ὑμέας ἐξ ἐμέο ἐούσης οὐδὲν λέξω (οὐ γὰρ ἂν νῦν πρῶτον ἐκμάθοιτε), προσσχορίζω δὲ ὑμέων πείθεσθαι Μαρδονίῳ. Ἐνορέω γὰρ ὑμῖν οὐκ οἰοισί τε ἐσομένοισι τὸν πάντα χρόνον πολεμέειν Ξέρξῃ (εἰ γὰρ ἐνῶρων τοῦτο ἐν ὑμῖν, οὐκ ἂν κοτε ἐς ὑμέας ἦλθον ἔχων λόγους τούσδε)· καὶ γὰρ δύναμις ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἢ βασιλέος ἐστὶ καὶ χεὶρ ὑπερμήκης. Ἦν ὦν μὴ αὐτίκα ὁμολογήσητε, μεγάλα προτεινόντων ἐπ' οἷσι ὁμολογέειν ἐθέλουσι, δειμαίνω ὑπὲρ ὑμέων ἐν τρίβῳ τε μάλιστα οἰκημένων τῶν συμμάχων πάντων αἰεὶ τε φθειρομένων μούνων, ἐξαίρετόν τι μεταίχμιον τὴν γῆν ἐκτημένων. Ἀλλὰ πείθεσθε· πολλοῦ γὰρ ὑμῖν ἄξια ταῦτα, εἰ βασιλεύς γε ὁ μέγας μούνοισι ὑμῖν Ἑλλήνων τὰς ἀμαρτάδας ἀπιεῖς ἐθέλει φίλος γενέσθαι. Ἀλέξανδρος μὲν ταῦτα ἔλεξε.<sup>5</sup>

We could speculate whether Herodotus learned this episode from a Macedonian or an Athenian source, or whether he simply linked every piece of information that he was able to come to. Although possible, it is highly unlikely that the story of what Alexander told the Athenians could have come from Macedon. The manner in which the Athenians are portrayed, the parts that testify to their character in historical context, as well as the effective way in which their final answer strikes the ears of

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<sup>5</sup> Hdt. 8.140.



the historiographer's audience – all these are healthy indicators that the version we have before us is Athenian. Despite the obvious ideological background and its purpose as a display of Athenian patriotism, one could easily argue that the story is believable and that there is no reason to doubt its reliability.

2. Alexander's message to the Athenians deviated from the political course of Darius, pursued faithfully by Xerxes as recently as the previous summer. By trying to swerve Athens from the ranks of the allies, Mardonius may have intended to restore the balance in naval matters, but no less important was the advantage he would have gained in the event of a land battle. One is tempted to recall that the Athenians may have found themselves in a similar situation once before: what Xerxes suggested now would in fact be a return to the situation that Athens arguably sought from Tissaphernes some thirty years earlier,<sup>6</sup> and which would probably have happened by itself if their relations had been advancing smoothly. It is clear that the reconciliation of Persia and Athens would particularly suit Alexander and his ties with the two warring parties; therefore, it is hardly surprising that, after faithfully conveying the message of Xerxes and Mardonius, he went on to express his personal views of how things stood. Not failing to stress his goodwill and benevolence – but also to mention his previous merits – he earnestly urged the Athenians to accept the offer of Xerxes.

Still, the Persian offer came too late. After several successful clashes on the battlefield, with the momentum gradually shifting to the Greek side, a return to the Persian sphere of interest would be too big of a pledge. It is hardly a shock that Athens rejected the offer of the King; but the cunning, sophisticated political game which took place behind the scenes was truly extraordinary.

By the time Alexander arrived in Athens, the biggest problem of the Athenians was neither the size of the Persian army nor the indifference of the native population, but the tricky attitude of the Spartans, who had already indicated their reluctance to fight north of the Isthmus and their

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<sup>6</sup> V. Hdt. 5.73, on the famous embassy that the Athenians sent to Sardis in order to conclude an alliance with the Persians, as they feared to be subdued by the Spartans under Cleomenes. The passage has provoked a long debate about the existence of a pro-Persian party in Athens. Cf. Raubitschek (1964); Badian (1994) 120-127; Hornblower (1994) 382-383.

intention to defend only Sparta and the Peloponnese. On the eve of a crucial land battle, this had to be taken seriously; more than anything, the Athenians now needed a strong enough argument to gain the support of the Spartans once again. Herodotus only briefly mentions the true intentions of the Athenians;<sup>7</sup> yet, the tone of his text reveals that Alexander's mission, regardless of the content of the message he was carrying, could not have happened at a more favorable moment. The Athenians sent a message – or knew a message had been sent – to Sparta about the arrival of an envoy sent by Mardonius. For the most part, everyone could have guessed what this envoy had to say, so the Athenians were right to expect that the Spartans would send envoys of their own, trying to counter the Persian offer.

Herein lies the explanation of the Athenian game. Before the matter was exposed to the ἐκκλησία, the βουλευταί were to hold a preliminary hearing. The discussion took place as stipulated, but instead of being short and effective, it stretched out for an unusually long time and was finally put on hold until the next day, a most rare occurrence at the time. This was more than enough to cause concern among the Spartans, who may have hinted their intention to retreat south of the Isthmus, but found it hard to believe that Athens would be paving the way for the Persians. The length and delay of the preliminary hearing could be interpreted as deliberation before the Persian offer. Sparta now faced a scenario of fighting Persia without Athenian help, and even the most loudmouthed Spartans recognised the ill wind. So the Spartans reacted exactly as the Athenians wanted them to – by agreeing to intercept the troops of Mardonius in Boeotia and try to prevent a second invasion of Attica.<sup>8</sup> While listening to Alexander – whose offer would have never

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<sup>7</sup> Hdt. 8.141.

<sup>8</sup> The Spartans, however, failed to fulfill the promise (Hdt. 9.6), causing a loss of another harvest in Attica. After Mardonius repeated the offer through Mourychides (Hdt. 9.4, φέροντα τοὺς αὐτοὺς λόγους τοὺς καὶ Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Μακεδὼν τοῖσι Ἀθηναίοισι διεπόρθμευσεν), the Athenians once more pressed the Spartans, who eventually intervened (Hg 9.7-9). For the problems in chronology, *v.* Hodlofski (1979) 55. Should one trust Herodotus (9.8), the relations of Athens and Sparta (as well as the negotiations with Persia) were apparently determined not only by what Athens would do, but even more by the progress of the fortifications at the Isthmus: Οὐδ' ἔχω εἰπεῖν τὸ αἴτιον δι' ὃ τι

been taken into account anyway – the Athenians envisioned something entirely different, namely, how to make use of the events as well as possible. By threatening the Spartans while giving Alexander a false hope, they succeeded in skilfully utilising his mission to their ends.

There is no way of knowing whether Alexander had any insight into the intentions of the Athenians. Is it possible that he knew what was going to happen and that, as a genuine *πρόξενος* and *εὐεργέτης*, he gave the Athenians a hand in order to help them achieve their goal? One might argue that Alexander agreed to present the Persian proposal as credibly as possible in order to make a strong impression on the Spartan delegation; in other words, this would mean that Alexander had an active role in this episode and that he explicitly put himself on the Athenian side. Still, this assumption seems to give too much credit to a purported *camaraderie* between Alexander and Athens. It is probable that Alexander supplied Athens with timber despite a strong Persian presence in Europe; this, however, was neither a favour, nor an expression of affection, but a simple trade deal with mutual benefit. Alexander trading with Athens at a difficult time did not routinely make him a trusted friend and ally; moreover, the proxeny could hardly be functional while he was in the Persian ranks. Lastly, the most problematic point is not Alexander's motivation, but the conviction of the Athenians that Alexander would accept their play, instead of promptly returning to Mardonius and telling him all about the cracks in the Greek ranks. Of course, the Athenians would have never accepted such a risk; in all likelihood, the king of Macedon had no way of knowing what was on their minds. He simply came to Athens to convey a message by Xerxes and Mardonius – in line with the task he was

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ἀπικομένου μὲν Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ Μακεδόνοιο ἐς Ἀθήνας σπουδὴν μεγάλην ἐποιήσαντο μὴ μηδίσαι Ἀθηναίους, τότε δὲ ὥρην ἐποιήσαντο οὐδεμίαν, ἄλλο γε ἢ ὅτι ὁ Ἰσθμός σφι ἐτετείχιστο καὶ ἐδόκεον Ἀθηναίων ἔτι δέεσθαι οὐδέν, ὅτε δὲ Ἀλέξανδρος ἀπύκετο ἐς τὴν Ἀττικὴν, οὐκ ἄπετετείχιστο, ἐργάζοντο δὲ μεγάλως καταρρωδηκότες τοὺς Πέρσας. Of course, one must not forget Herodotus' anti-Spartan frame of mind, as well as his wish to give an account of Spartan self-centeredness; however, it is telling that the Spartans would leave Peloponnese only after the death of Cleombrotus, with the young Pausanias as regent. Cf. note 29.

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entrusted, but also in his own interest – and be as persuasive as possible.<sup>9</sup>

Thus we can assume that Alexander spoke honestly and came forward freely with his own view of how things stood. Unfortunately, his words were neither well received, nor pleasant to hear. It was a rather unhappy oversight: the threats by Xerxes and Mardonius may well have been expected, but overstressing and illustrating them was uncalled for. After quickly going through his declaration of friendship, Alexander went on to repeat that the stubborn confidence of the Athenians would cause the fall of their city. Alexander firmly stood behind the words of the Persians and, at that very moment, his past merits and professed benevolence faded to nothing. The interests of Alexander were reasonable; but what of his performance? The Athenians realised that, despite being their *πρόξενος* and *εὐεργέτης*, the Macedonian king had a dissenting attitude. However, it was the Spartans who were left outright fuming by his performance: *τύραννος γὰρ ἔων τυράννῳ συγκατεργάζεται*, they said, and *βαρβάροισι ἐστὶ οὔτε πιστὸν οὔτε ἀληθὲς οὐδέν*.<sup>10</sup> Even the Athenians did not think it was appropriate to defend – if not Alexander, then at least their choice of *πρόξενος* and the titles which they had had honoured him with. Alexander's positioning in this episode was rather unfortunate: instead of playing an (almost) neutral intermediary between two warring parties, he chose to participate head-in, damaging his reputation in Athens even more than by his participation in the Persian forces, which we will be discussing next.

3. An exact reconstruction of the battle of Plataea, during which Alexander lined up against Athenian troops for the first time, is almost completely unfeasible. The main reason for this is the disorganised, often conflicting description of events in Herodotus, whose insufficient knowledge of military matters comes to light here more than in any

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<sup>9</sup> Scaife (1989) thinks that the entire episode – like several others in Herodotus – is a skillfully composed rhetorical exercise with a logical internal structure. While the schematics of the text are indeed obvious, there is nothing to indicate that the heart of the story and the opposing attitudes do not have a tangible historical background.

<sup>10</sup> Hdt. 8.142.

other battle.<sup>11</sup> The contentious description of the battle may be due to an attempt to find a middle ground between several versions, which apparently did not coincide even in essential detail. But let us begin with what Herodotus has to say on this matter:

Μετὰ δὲ τὴν ἐπειρώτησιν τῶν χρησμῶν καὶ παραίνεσιν τὴν ἐκ Μαρδονίου νύξ τε ἐγένετο καὶ ἐς φυλακὰς ἐτάσσοντο. Ὡς δὲ πρόσω τῆς νυκτὸς προελήλατο καὶ ἡσυχίη τε ἐδόκεε εἶναι ἀνὰ τὰ στρατόπεδα καὶ μάλιστα οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι ἐν ὕπνῳ, τηνικαῦτα προσελάσας ἵππῳ πρὸς τὰς φυλακὰς τὰς Ἀθηναίων Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Ἀμύντεω, στρατηγός τε ἐὼν καὶ βασιλεὺς Μακεδόνων, ἐδίζητο τοῖσι στρατηγοῖσι ἐς λόγους ἐλθεῖν. Τῶν δὲ φυλάκων οἱ μὲν πλείονες παρέμενον, οἱ δ' ἔθεον ἐπὶ τοὺς στρατηγούς, ἐλθόντες δὲ ἔλεγον ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἦκοι ἐπ' ἵππου ἐκ τοῦ στρατοπέδου τοῦ Μήδων, ὃς ἄλλο μὲν οὐδὲν παραγυμνοῖ ἔπος, στρατηγούς δὲ ὀνομάζων ἐθέλειν φησὶ ἐς λόγους ἐλθεῖν. Οἱ δὲ ἐπεὶ ταῦτα ἤκουσαν, αὐτίκα εἶποντο ἐς τὰς φυλακὰς.

Ἀπικομένοισι δὲ ἔλεγε Ἀλέξανδρος τάδε· «Ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, παραθήκην ὑμῖν τὰ ἔπεα τάδε τίθεμαι, ἀπόρρητα ποιεύμενος πρὸς μηδένα λέγειν ὑμέας ἄλλον ἢ Πausanίην, μή με καὶ διαφθείρητε· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἔλεγον, εἰ μὴ μεγάλως ἐκηδόμην συναπάσης τῆς Ἑλλάδος· αὐτός τε γὰρ Ἕλληνα γένος εἰμὶ τώρχαῖον, καὶ ἀντ' ἐλευθέρης δεδουλωμένην οὐκ ἂν ἐθέλοιμι ὀρᾶν τὴν Ἑλλάδα. Λέγω δὲ ὧν ὅτι Μαρδονίῳ τε καὶ τῇ στρατιῇ τὰ σφάγια οὐ δύναται καταθύμια γενέσθαι· πάλαι γὰρ ἂν ἐμάχεσθε· νῦν δὲ οἱ δέδοκται τὰ μὲν σφάγια ἔαν χαίρειν, ἅμα ἡμέρη δὲ διαφωσκούση συμβολὴν ποιέεσθαι· καταρρώδηκε γὰρ μὴ πλείονες συλλεχθῆτε, ὡς ἐγὼ εἰκάζω. Πρὸς ταῦτα ἐτοιμάζεσθε· ἦν δὲ ἄρα ὑπερβάλλεται τὴν συμβολὴν Μαρδόνιος καὶ μὴ ποιῆται, λιπαρέετε μένοντες· ὀλιγέων γὰρ σφι ἡμερέων λείπεται σιτία. Ἦν δὲ ὑμῖν ὁ πόλεμος ὅδε

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<sup>11</sup> On the manner Herodotus portrays and explains the battles, *v.* Tritle (2006), *esp.* 218–220 on Plataea.

κατὰ νόον τελευτήσῃ, μνησθῆναί τινα χρὴ καὶ ἐμέο  
ἐλευθερώσιος πέρι, ὃς Ἑλλήνων εἵνεκα ἔργον οὕτω  
παράβολον ἔργασμαι ὑπὸ προθυμίας, ἐθέλων ὑμῖν  
δηλῶσαι τὴν διάνοιαν τὴν Μαρδονίου, ἵνα μὴ  
ἐπιπέσωσι ὑμῖν [ἐξαίφνης] οἱ βάρβαροι μὴ  
προσδεκομένοις κω. Εἰμὶ δὲ Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Μακεδών.»  
Ὁ μὲν ταῦτα εἶπας ἀπήλαυνε ὀπίσω ἐς τὸ στρατόπεδον  
καὶ τὴν ἐωυτοῦ τάξιν.<sup>12</sup>

The story of Alexander's valiant midnight mission confronts us with a wide variety of difficulties. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition of things that have been frequently pointed out, we will take into account only four crucial details: its probability with respect to the situation on the ground; its course; the manner of transmitting the message; and, finally, its real consequences.

We cannot help but begin with what Herodotus offers. He places the Macedonian units on the right side of the Persian line, precisely in the part of the line that was set against the Athenians;<sup>13</sup> Alexander's troops were grouped together with the contingents of Thracians, Mysians, Paeonians and a number of other tribes, making the sum of the auxiliary units.<sup>14</sup> Should we observe their positions from a bird's eye view, it is true that Alexander should have been able to approach the Athenian camp without difficulty. However, in order to carry out such a mission, good placement is not enough; one needs to remain unnoticed by one, but well noted and recognised by the other warring side. This is where the first problems arise. In order to walk out of the Persian camp, Alexander would had to leave the Macedonian quarters, go unnoticed by each and every auxiliary guard and pass through the Persian front

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<sup>12</sup> Hdt. 9.44-45.

<sup>13</sup> Hdt. 9.31.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander had probably brought with him only light infantry. Herodotus does not make a mention of any type of Macedonian cavalry; in any case, even if the cavalry had any part to play, it would be needed to a greater extent elsewhere – for instance, in Boeotia – rather than in the battle of Plataea.

line.<sup>15</sup> But all of this could have been made possible only if every guard on the Persian side was fast asleep, or if everyone knew and approved of Alexander's mission; of course, both things are unthinkable. No less surprising is the fact that the Athenian guards saw an unknown man – apparently not an Athenian – approaching from the Persian camp at a gallop, allowing him all the same to come within shooting distance and speak to them. To accept this as true, one should assume that the layout of the forces at Plataea was truly unusual, and that what was going on would surely be deemed incredible in any other battle.

Both the course of the king's undertaking and the manner in which he delivered the message do not fall far behind his miraculous penetration through the lines. If one believes Herodotus, after reaching the Athenian camp and appearing before the Athenian commanders, Alexander engaged in an inspirational, virtually breathless tirade – after which he introduced himself, turned around and left. His listeners appear to be neither surprised by his arrival, nor compelled to answer; they simply listen and let him go. But this, in a sense, is a problem of scenery; much more confusing is the problem of content. In the first place, one should consider whether Alexander was able to surprise the Athenians with a secret, while they were standing face-to-face with the enemy for eleven long days. Furthermore, the text of Herodotus leaves the impression that Mardonius' attack would present the Greeks with the very opportunity they hoped for: a way to start a defensive battle, which according to the divinations would result in a victory.<sup>16</sup> In other words, Alexander's message does not have the same practical value as, for example, the one that Alcibiades tried to convey to the Athenian commanders at Aigospotamoi, warning them that their position was far more risky than they thought. Alexander does not reveal the Persian order of battle (which, as later events will show, was already known to the Greeks), neither the tactical intentions of Mardonius, nor the time when the attack was supposed to begin. Last of all, we find it hard to believe that Mardonius had problems with his chain of supply; it was

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, this is not to be likened to the front line in the order of battle; on the other hand, it is clear that the auxiliary units would not have set up camp at the enemy's reach, as they would be exposed in the event of a sudden attack.

<sup>16</sup> Hdt. 9.36.



precisely the Greeks who were experiencing such problems, eventually having to leave their positions.<sup>17</sup> Even if they heard things they wanted to hear, the Athenians had no tangible reason to believe them.

Let us take a brief look at the consequences of the incident. Allegedly prompted by Alexander's warning, the Greeks went on to perform quite an unusual manoeuvre, with the Athenians and the Spartans swapping their positions on the wings; however, moments before the impending attack, they seem to be swapping places once again, causing everyone to return to their starting position. The outcome of the entire shake-up was bordering on comical: the move equalled zero, as there was absolutely no difference to the original position of the allies.<sup>18</sup> The dangerous attack that pushed Alexander to such an undertaking never happened. The Persians went on to cut the Greek lines of supply and hinder their access to water; the Greeks, as we mentioned earlier, had to retreat to higher ground in order to protect their supplies.<sup>19</sup>

4. As a final point, we would like to focus on the propagandist value of the Plataean episode. The story has been scrutinised by nearly every scholar studying Herodotus or Alexander I, and though there is no consensus on several bits and pieces, most scholars agree that Herodotus' account is a fictitious episode with a propagandist nature. The question is, whose propaganda does it represent? A number of scholars approach the problem from Alexander's point of view, going as far as to argue that the story comes from the king himself and was later acknowledged by Herodotus.<sup>20</sup> Taken *prima facie*, this conclusion seems reasonable and convincing enough; not unlike Diomedes and Odysseus, the great heroes of yore, Alexander – αὐτός τε γὰρ Ἑλλήν γένος τῶρχαῖον, as stated in 9.45 – undertakes a perilous night excursion for the safety of the Greeks. We have already seen that the value and impact of the delivered message is debatable: in a sequence of amusing, rather

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<sup>17</sup> Hdt. 9.51.

<sup>18</sup> The manoeuvres are also mentioned by Plutarch (*Arist.* 16), who offers no interpretation, mentioning instead that the entire narrative stems from Herodotus.

<sup>19</sup> Hdt. 9.49-51.

<sup>20</sup> e.g. Borza (1990) 110; Hammond (1979) 98; Errington (1990) 12-13.



than enigmatic manoeuvres, the Spartans and the Athenians swap their positions, prompting Mardonius to do the same; later, after they move back to their original posts, Mardonius follows suit once again, putting us in exactly the same place we started from.

Should we approach matters from this angle, Borza would seem to be right in concluding that "...the tale of Alexander seems separate, as if from a different, non-Athenian source. It is quite likely derived from Alexander himself."<sup>21</sup> However, if we approach Herodotus' depiction of Plataea first and foremost as a literary creation, instead of primarily or exclusively as a historical source,<sup>22</sup> we may reach a rather different conclusion. Even if we put aside the morning manoeuvres, the value of Alexander's message remains questionable; if this is indeed a piece of Macedonian propaganda – made up by Alexander himself, no less – one would be right to expect a more meaningful result, or at least a more adventurous depiction of the ride between the opposite camps. But if this entire story is not a piece of (first and foremost) Macedonian propaganda, whose purpose does it serve, and what may its real point be?

Though somewhat eclipsed by the battles of Thermopylae and Salamis, it was the battle of Plataea that decided the fate of Greece, and its meaning was not lost to the contemporaries; it comes as no surprise that many cities celebrated their contribution in the victory,<sup>23</sup> even though there were as many, if not more, Greeks in the Persian army than in the Allied troops.<sup>24</sup> With the relations between Athens and Sparta souring in the following decades, being a part of the epic victory became even more of a burning issue; and it is at this particular time and context that Herodotus wrote the Histories. Whether the Spartan version of events is lost beyond any hope of recovery<sup>25</sup> is somewhat secondary to our theme; the important point is that Athens was the clear champion in this duel of pufferies, in no small part thanks to Herodotus himself. A comparison of Herodotus to the Plataean elegy of Simonides – one of the

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<sup>21</sup> Borza (1990) 110.

<sup>22</sup> Rightly stressed by Flower – Marincola (2002), 20–22.

<sup>23</sup> Jung (2006) 298–383 (*non vidimus*); Cartledge (2013) 122–161.

<sup>24</sup> Cartledge (2013) 86–87.

<sup>25</sup> Marincola (2007) 106–107.

works Herodotus used for the campaign and the ensuing battle – sheds some light on the problem of the rivalling traditions. As expected, there are many similarities between the two works, but also a number of clear differences.<sup>26</sup> One such difference known to Plutarch was the role of the Corinthians in the battle: Simonides has them stationed in the centre of the line, while Herodotus claims they had no active part in the actual fighting.<sup>27</sup>

At any rate, the Athenian (and occasional anti-Spartan) inclinations of Herodotus are clear enough even without Simonides. One telling example is the Spartan decision to finally send an army north of the Isthmus, reached only after a convincing argument by the Tegean Chileus, who warned the Spartans that the Isthmian fortifications were useless without the Athenian fleet.<sup>28</sup> The episode is rather unconvincing; one would expect the leading Spartans to see the essential change of circumstances should Athens come to a separate peace with Persia, and reach the same conclusion as did Chileus.<sup>29</sup> The Tegean is an obvious example of the “good advisor” type, not uncommon in Herodotus, but that is beyond the point of the story. The implications of the whole episode are quite damning: even in times of extreme need, the Spartans drag their feet and weigh up whether to fulfil the obligation to help their loyal Athenian allies. Needless to say, the Athenians act as the exact opposite: they are loyal allies and steadfast champions of the Hellenic cause; they are bestowed with the command of the allied left wing because of their past and present outstanding deeds;<sup>30</sup> after the battered Megarians threaten to leave the line unless someone takes over their place, the Athenians alone volunteer to help and take over the perilous

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<sup>26</sup> Boedeker (2001a) 131–134.

<sup>27</sup> Plut., *De Herod. Malig.*, 42 (872d); Hdt. 9.69.1.

<sup>28</sup> Hdt. 9.8–10.1.

<sup>29</sup> But see M. Lupi, ‘Sparta and the Persian Wars, 499–478’, 280, in: Powell, A. (ed.), *A Companion to Sparta*, Vol.1, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ, 2018, who thinks that Herodotus implies that the change of heart was a result of a generational change, since Cleombrotus died after returning from the Isthmus and the command was entrusted to Pausanias.

<sup>30</sup> Hdt. 9.26–28.1.

position with a group of 300 selected soldiers;<sup>31</sup> not only do they ward off the Persian attack in the following clash, but they even manage to do away with Masistius, a highly respected Persian commander;<sup>32</sup> later on, they alone stay with the Spartans and the Tegeans and take part in the great battle. In view of the events from the following decades, one may wonder whether it really was a coincidence that the Corinthians were removed from the battle; that the Megarians, though fighting bravely, were on the verge of deserting the allied cause; that the Aeginetes were vilified; and that the Spartans were being themselves.

With the problem already examined by several scholars, there would be no need to take the discussion any further; however, this anti-Spartan element in Herodotus' narrative is hardly ever associated with Alexander's nightly visit, even though the episode is pivotal in exposing the Spartans to a subtle, yet severe criticism. Herodotus' ninth book is bursting with Homeric and generally epic allusions, ranging from arguments on who deserves to be honoured in certain situations, challenges for separate duels, disguised hexameters in prose, to the structure of the ending of the book itself.<sup>33</sup> The reader is purposely brought back into the world of Homeric heroes and their relentless pursuit of ἀρετή, as the great deeds from the Persian wars were later often associated to allusions from the distant, epic past.<sup>34</sup> Put in this context, the conduct of the Spartans becomes nothing short of cowardly. After the Athenian commanders delivered Alexander's message to Pausanias, ὁ δὲ τούτῳ τῷ λόγῳ καταρρωδήσας τοὺς Πέρσας ἔλεγε τάδε· ἐπεὶ τοίνυν ἐς ἡῶ ἡ συμβολή γίνεται, ὑμέας μὲν χρεόν ἐστι τοὺς Ἀθηναίους στήναι κατὰ τοὺς Πέρσας, ἡμέας δὲ κατὰ τοὺς Βοιωτοὺς τε καὶ τοὺς κατ' ὑμέας τεταγμένους Ἑλλήνων; a suggestion that the Athenians eagerly accept.<sup>35</sup> From a heroic perspective, this behavior is deplorable: after the morning manoeuvres, not once but twice the

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<sup>31</sup> Hdt. 9.21.3.

<sup>32</sup> Hdt. 9.22-23.

<sup>33</sup> Boedeker (2001a) 121-124; Ead (2002); Flower – Marincola (2002) 22. On the structural similarities between Herodotus and the *Iliad* in the closing of the work, v. Herington (1991).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Francis (1990); Boedeker (2001b).

<sup>35</sup> Hdt. 9.46.

Spartans avoid the prospect of facing the best and most courageous elements of the Persian army, being obviously happy with fighting “the Persian servants” and leaving the prospect of glory to the Athenians. But worse is yet to come. Rebuking the Spartans on the grounds of their conduct, Mardonius sends a messenger with an offer that they alone fight a separate battle against an equal number of Persians and thus decide the fate of Greece. A well-versed reader will recognise a distant echo of the famous words of Achilles before the final duel with Hector: παντοίης ἀρετῆς μμνήσκειο· νῦν σε μάλα χρὴ / αἰχμητὴν τ' ἔμεναι καὶ θαρσαλέον πολεμιστὴν / οὗ τοι ἔτ' ἔσθ' ὑπάλυξις, ἄφαρ δέ σε Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη / ἔγχει ἐμῷ δαμάα<sup>36</sup> – but to their greatest embarrassment, the Spartans do not even reply, let alone accept the challenge.<sup>37</sup> The Spartan conduct remains gutless even without the subtle Homeric allusions: one is tempted to compare it to the behavior of the Tegean king Echemus, who in the olden days not only accepted Hyllus’ challenge, but managed to defeat him in single combat, saving the Peloponnese from a Heraclid invasion. The comparison is all the more glaring, as Herodotus describes the duel between Hyllus and Echemus twenty chapters before.<sup>38</sup>

All of this stems from Alexander’s nocturnal visit alone. It is his message that sets in motion the whole sequence of events, reaching its peak with Mardonius’ challenge to a separate battle between the Spartans and the Persians, and the craven silence of the Spartans. And this is, specifically, the reason we cannot agree that this entire episode is unconnected to the rest of the (battle) narrative, coming from a non-Athenian source and serving only Alexander’s goals. In actual fact, Alexander turns out to be rather unimportant in the bigger picture: after appearing on the scene as a *deus ex machina* and setting the wheels in motion, he goes on to disappear, nowhere to be seen again. Bury was probably among the first to acknowledge that these episodes – the night-visit of Alexander, the fruitless Spartan attempts to evade a clash with the Persians and the challenge of Mardonius – make a part of a spiteful

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<sup>36</sup> *Il.* 22.268-271

<sup>37</sup> *Hdt.* 9.48-49.1. Cf. How – Wells (1912), *ad loc.* for comparable Homeric taunts and challenges.

<sup>38</sup> *Hdt.* 9.26.3-5.

tale, with the sole purpose of tarnishing the Spartan achievements.<sup>39</sup> It is true that the reader gets the impression that the Spartans are the accidental, unwilling heroes of the day, heroes whose glorious accomplishment – had Chance not intervened – should have been Athenian. Alexander cannot be made entirely irrelevant, as the episode runs clearly in his favour; after all, he undertakes a very dangerous journey just to warn and advise the Greeks. Yet, at the same time, it is obvious that the story does not stand on its own simply for the sake of Alexander, but is skillfully integrated in the main narrative that exposes the behaviour of the Spartans; and this is notably different from the opinion that it represents an *interpretatio Macedonica*, put together solely for the sake of Alexander and the kingdom of Macedon.

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<sup>39</sup> Bury – Meiggs (1975), 184.

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