APPENDIX O

The Persian Army in Herodotus

§1. The Persian army of Herodotus' *Histories* presents a paradox. On the one hand there are the swift, powerful warriors of Cyrus and Cambyses, capable of creating the greatest empire the world had yet seen. On the other, there are the lumbering and inept troops of Darius and Xerxes that invaded Greece in 490 and 480–479. Herodotus' depiction of the latter is plainly skewed to present a picture of heroic Greek resistance against overwhelming odds. Little if any of the information he offers on the size, equipment, tactics, and leadership of Persian armies during the Greek-Persian Wars, therefore, can be taken at face value. On rare occasions, evidence from archaeology and the few surviving Achaimenid documents allow us to make more realistic assessments of Persian military capabilities. For the most part, however, we have no option but to rely on Herodotus and attempt to correct for his biases. Even so, his narrative is sometimes so selective that no more than educated guesses about what actually happened are possible.

§2. Determining the size of Persian armies is exceedingly difficult. No reliable figures are available for the expedition of Datis and Artaphrenes in 490, despite Herodotus' claim that the Persians suffered 6,400 casualties at Marathon[a] (6.117). It is possible that Datis and Artaphrenes led a force equal or inferior in numbers to the Athenians and Plataeans who faced them there. Xerxes' army in 480 is said to have mustered 1,700,000 infantry and 80,000 cavalry (7.60, 7.184), divided into twenty-nine national contingents under the command of six generals (7.61–88). These figures are impossibly exaggerated.[b] Comparisons with other ancient armies operating in the eastern Mediterranean, along with analysis of the practical constraints of supply and movement, suggest that Xerxes actually fielded perhaps 75,000 to 100,000 men. The next year at Plataea,[c] Mardonios allegedly deployed a force of 300,000 (8.100, 9.32). Less than half this number, though, could have fit into the palisaded camp Herodotus describes (9.15). Indeed, his narrative of Greek and Persian deployments at Plataea implies that the two sides had battle lines of roughly equal length. Some modern scholars estimate that the Persian army at

O.2a Marathon: Map O, inset.

O.2b For a more detailed discussion of the size of Xerxes' expeditionary force in 480, see Appendix R.

O.2c Plataea: Map O, inset.

Plataea numbered about 30,000 Persians and 20,000 Greek allies, compared to the 40,000 hoplites Herodotus reports for the combined Greek army (9.29).

§3. Persian units were organized on a decimal basis: squads of ten, companies of 100, regiments of 1,000, and brigades of 10,000 (7.81). There were also picked units of 1,000 men for special missions (9.63). Achaimenid ration tablets from Egypt and Babylonia[a] reveal that the actual strength of a unit could fall well below its official complement. A notable exception was the elite infantry brigade of 10,000 Immortals (7.31, 7.83), so called because its casualties were always immediately replaced.

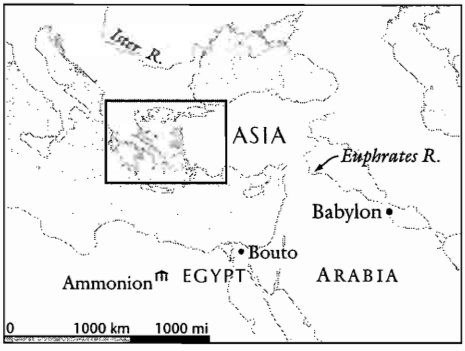
§4. The Persian "Army List" of Herodotus (7.61–88) details the equipment of the various national contingents of the army, but troops armed in the Persian style dominate Herodotus' battle narratives. Persian infantry wore little armor, often consisting of no more than a reinforced fabric tunic and trousers, and carried large rectangular shields of wicker and leather (7.61, 9.63). They had swords or daggers and short spears (7.41, 7.211) for close combat, but relied primarily on their large bows (7.61). On the battlefield, Persian troops could use their shields to form a protective barricade from behind which they could shoot their bows (9.61–62, 9.102). After loosing volleys of arrows to soften up an enemy, they could follow up with a hand-to-hand assault (1.214, 9.62) or let their cavalry charge the enemy's now disorganized ranks (6.29).

§5. In his account of Plataea, Herodotus stresses the inability of lightly armored Persian infantry to withstand well-protected Greek hoplites in melée combat (9.63). Despite their inferior equipment, though, Persian infantry displayed great bravery (7.210, 9.62); Herodotus' tale of their being driven forward with whips at Thermopylae[a] has the ring of Greek propaganda (7.223). The reluctant troops in the Persian army tended to be Greeks, especially Ionians (4.97–98, 4.136, 6.99). Persian infantry were also tough and capable fighters. At Marathon they withstood a hoplite charge and held their own for a long time before the Athenians gained the upper hand (6.113). Herodotus' own narrative, moreover, reveals that Persian infantry had repeatedly defeated more heavily armored opponents, including hoplites, in Egypt and Ionia[b] (3.11, 5.119–122, 6.28–30).

§6. It comes as no surprise that the Persians, who prized the ability to ride, shoot a bow, and tell the truth (1.136), excelled as horsemen. Their mounts were of the highest quality (7.196) and sometimes received special combat training (5.109–113). Persian cavalry typically wore metal breastplates and helmets. An uncertain proportion possessed additional armor, and in some cases their horses too may have been armored (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.8.6). The general Masistios wore a particularly splendid and heavy cuirass at Plataea (9.22). Like infantry, cavalry was organized on a decimal basis, with regiments of 1,000 maneuvering independently in battle (7.41).

§7. The main weapons of the Persian cavalry were spears and bows (9.49). Rather than closing immediately with an enemy, they preferred to begin a battle by hurling missiles from a distance, often attacking in unit relays (9.18–22, 9.52, 9.57,

O.3a Egypt, Babylon: Map O, locator.
O.5a Thermopylae: Map O.
O.5b Ionia: Map O.


Inset R.
ASIA
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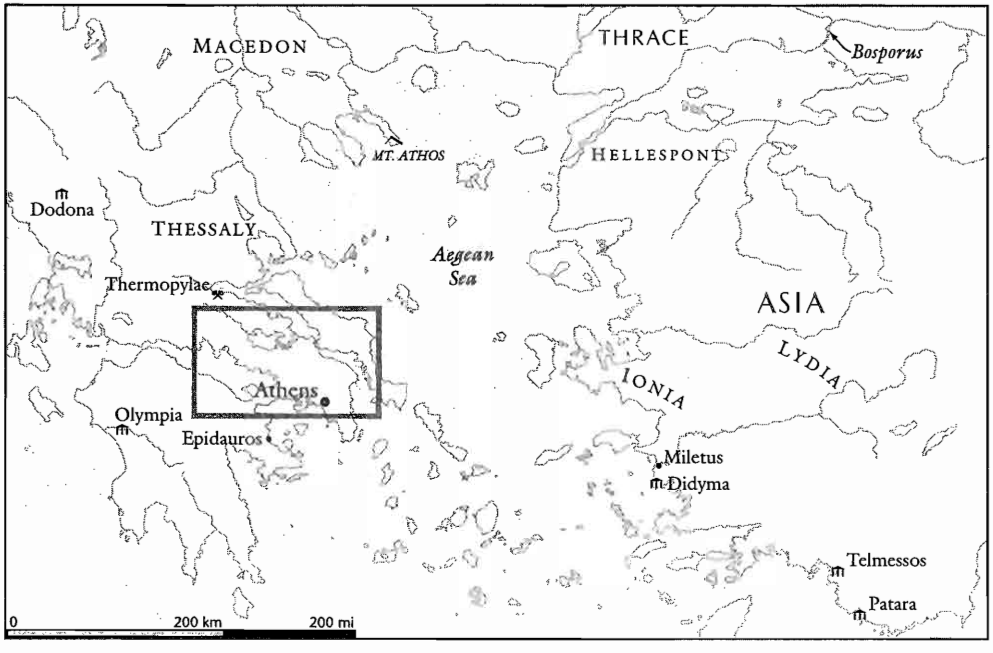
MACEDON
THRACE
Bosporus
MT. ATHOS
HELLESPONT
Dodona
THESSALY
Aegean Sea
Thermopylae
ASIA
LYDIA
IONIA
Athens
Olympia
Epidauros
Miletus
Didyma
Telmessos
Patara
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200 km
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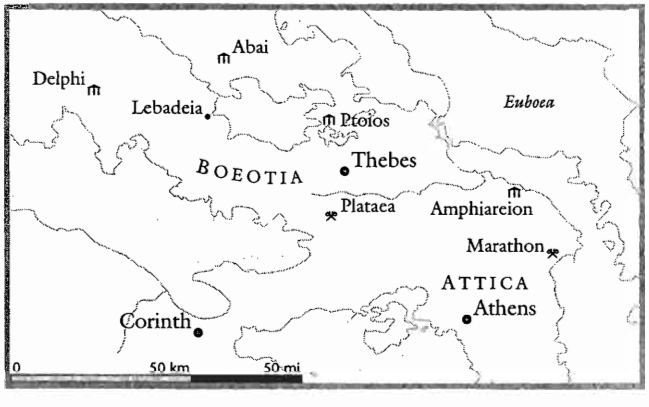
Abai
Delphi
Lebadeia
Ptoios
Euboea
BOEOTIA
Thebes
Plataea
Amphiareion
Marathon
ATTICA
Athens
Corinth
0
50 km
50 mi

MAP O

9.71). Once this harassment had broken the enemy's formation, the cavalry could pursue and ride down fleeing fugitives. These tactics required open, level ground to work effectively (9.21). Datis and Artaphrenes are said to have landed at Marathon for exactly this reason (6.102), and Mardonios in 479 apparently left Attica for Boeotia[a] because the latter region was more suited for cavalry (9.13). Cavalry was useful in protecting retreating infantry against hostile pursuit (9.68) and could inflict severe losses[a] on disordered hoplites (9.69). Sometimes it was employed to ride behind the enemy's army to capture or at least disrupt the flow of supplies (9.50). The Persians also conducted some of the first known experiments in the long-range seaborne transport of cavalry (6.95).

§8. While Persian troops were skilled and courageous, their leadership was often deficient. To be sure, on some occasions Persian commanders did display tactical brilliance. At Thermopylae, for example, Xerxes and his officers skillfully pinned the defending Greeks with what may well have been a series of diversionary frontal assaults while they scouted for a way around the narrow pass. After locating a flanking route, they then executed a swift and well-coordinated night march to turn Leonidas' position (7.214–218). Elsewhere, though, Persian leadership in the Greek-Persian Wars failed. With rare exceptions (6.29), infantry and cavalry attacks were never properly combined for mutual support[a] (9.23). This lack of coordination may explain the notable absence of Persian horsemen from Herodotus' account of Marathon. Some have surmised that Datis and Artaphrenes re-embarked their cavalry in preparation to transport their force elsewhere without considering how this withdrawal would leave their infantry vulnerable to a sudden Greek hoplite attack. At Plataea, Mardonios led both infantry and cavalry, but was unable to keep his units in proper formation (9.59). While earlier Persian leaders had been famous for their use of stratagems and trickery (1.79–80, 4.201), the commanders during the wars with the Greeks were, at least as Herodotus portrays them, easy prey to Greek ruses (7.211).

§9. Persian commanders drew on a Near Eastern tradition of siege technology that had long been unsurpassed. Their engineers expertly used siege mounds, rams, and mines to capture fortified towns (1.162, 4.200, 6.18). Cyrus even dug channels to divert the Euphrates River during his siege of Babylon, enabling his troops to enter the city (1.190–191). Occasionally the Persians conducted direct assaults on fortifications (6.101). More often they relied on careful reconnaissance before using stealth (1.84), deceit (3.152–158), or traitors (6.101) to breach enemy defenses. They also excelled in constructing city walls (1.98–99, 1.177–181) and palisaded army camps (4.124, 9.65), and were tenacious in defending both (5.101–102, 9.70).

§10. The Persians also displayed their extraordinary engineering skills on campaign. They were capable of laying long pontoon bridges across major water obsta-

O.7a Attica, Boeotia: Map O.

O.8a Although the Persian and Boeotian cavalry did support and assist their infantry when the latter were fleeing from the enemy at the end of the pitched battle.

cles, including the Bosporus[a] (4.83–88) and the Ister (modern Danube) River (4.97–98). In 480, to avoid the delay, the labor and the risk of ferrying men, horses, and supplies by boat, they constructed not one but two bridges across the Hellespont[b] (7.36). To forestall the dangers of a rough sea passage, they cut a canal through the peninsula of Mount Athos,[c] complete with breakwaters at both ends to protect the entrances and prevent the canal from silting up (7.22–23, 7.37).

§11. Persian logistical services were similarly advanced. A system of pipelines and camel convoys carrying water enabled Cambyses to traverse the Arabian[a] desert on his way to conquer Egypt (3.9). For Xerxes' expedition, a carefully sited series of supply depots enabled the army to march swiftly across Thrace and Macedon and into Thessaly[b] (7.25). In some cases, supplies were requisitioned from towns along the route (7.118–121). After that, the army was efficiently supplied by sea. Mardonios in 479 prepared Thebes[c] as a base, with ample provisions and fodder (9.41). Herodotus harps on the rivers that Xerxes' force supposedly drank dry, but even he admits the overall effectiveness of Persia's quartermasters (7.43, 7.109, 7.187). The Persians also exploited the logistical vulnerabilities of their enemies. During the Plataea campaign they raided Greek supply convoys (9.39) and fouled vital water sources (9.49). Methodical preparation was the key to Persian logistics (7.20–21). On the rare instances when their system failed (3.25), it was the result of hasty and insufficient planning.

§12. The Persians who invaded Greece in 490 and 480–479 were trained, brave soldiers, not an unwilling rabble. Even Herodotus' slanted narrative reveals that Greek victory did not come easily. If the Persian center at Marathon had been able to follow up its success (6.113), or if Masistios and Mardonios had not been killed at Plataea (9.22, 9.63), these decisive battles might easily have gone the other way. A realistic appreciation of the Persian army thus enhances, rather than detracts from, our appreciation of the Greek accomplishment in the Greek-Persian Wars.

John W. I. Lee
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O.10a Bosporus: Map O.
O.10b Hellespont: Map O.
O.10c Mount Athos: Map O.

O.11a Arabia: Map O, locator.
O.11b Thrace, Macedon, Thessaly: Map O.
O.11c Thebes, Boeotia: Map O, inset.