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‘NEITHER THE LESS VALOROUS NOR THE WEAKER’

Persian military might and the battle of Plataia

Introduction¹

Not all myths of Greek power and Persian weakness have yet been dispelled. The history of the eastern empire and her wars with the city-states at her western fringe is still sometimes coloured by the assumptions of the victors. While George Cawkwell, in his landmark study of the Persian Empire’s struggles with Greece in the course of the fifth and fourth centuries BC,² certainly took a great effort to correct the shortcomings of our predominantly Greek sources, he still occasionally echoes the statements made in just those sources – and this cannot always be entirely justified.

The point addressed in this article is his description of the battle of Plataia. The campaign leading up to this confrontation and the aftermath of the Greek victory are all sketched with great insight into Persian strategic concerns and with a healthy amount of scepticism towards the writings of Herodotos. However, when it comes to the battle proper, suddenly Cawkwell’s scepticism seems to take a back seat. The account is no more than a reiteration of the well-known claims of Herodotos and Aischylos that ‘it was a match between spear and bow’, a clash of armour versus cloth, which proved ‘the superiority of the Greek hoplite to Oriental infantry.’³

This assumption, however widespread,⁴ is absurdly simplistic. What follows is an attempt to show that neither the military realities of the day, nor the account of Herodotos,

1 I am greatly indebted to professor A. Kuhrt and professor H. van Wees at UCL for their invaluable comments on various drafts of this article. Any errors or oversights in what follows remain, of course, entirely my own.

2 Cawkwell, G., *The Greek Wars: the Failure of Persia* (New York 2005).

3 Cawkwell, *The Greek Wars* (as in n. 2), 115, 251; Hdt. 9.62.3, 9.63.3; Aischylos, *Persians* 239-240, 803-822.

4 Anderson, J.K., *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1970), 7; Farrokh, K., *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War* (Oxford 2007), 82, 84; Hanson, V.D., *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (New York 1989), 9-13; Hignett, C., *Xerxes’ Invasion of Greece* (Oxford 1963), 51, 244; Holland, T., *Persian Fire: the First World Empire and the Battle for the West* (London 2005), 344; Schwartz, A., *Reinstating the Hoplite: Arms, Armour and Phalanx Fighting in Archaic and Classical Greece* (Stuttgart 2009), 276; Seibt, G.F., *Griechische Söldner im Achaimenidenreich* (Bonn 1977), 15, 51, 123; Sekunda, N., *The Persian*

insofar as it is reliable, support the notion that technological differences between Greek and Persian soldiers proved decisive at Plataia. Many other factors played a part in securing the Greek victory – and with it, the Greek reputation for military superiority, which led to the emergence of a massive mercenary market in the century and a half to come.

Descriptions of the Battle

Given the central role played by the Persian Wars in the history and self-image of the Greeks, it is no surprise that references to its climactic and decisive battle exist in several extant sources. These go back to the time of the struggle itself. Aischylos was a contemporary Athenian and may in fact have fought at Plataia, as he certainly did at Marathon. Yet he only states very generally that the Greeks fought with spears rather than bows, and his remark about Plataia merely stresses the crucial contribution of the Lakedaimonians – the metaphorical ‘Dorian spear’ – in securing victory. Despite his personal involvement in the events, he does not actually offer much that could help us understand the battle proper.

For this purpose there are three narrative accounts of the battle to turn to.⁵ The earliest and by far the most elaborate of these can be found in Herodotos. Needless to say, this source is problematic; Herodotos was primarily concerned with writing a good story, was probably influenced by the biases of his sources and his Athenian surroundings at the time of writing, and described many things in detail that he could not possibly have known about.⁶ Yet for the battle of Plataia he offers the greatest amount of information, and he is the only one who may conceivably have used eyewitness reports. Herodotos provides the general framework of events, the catalogue of troops and an almost day-to-day account of the course of the battle.⁷

The other two sources are much less useful. Both Diodoros and Plutarch appear to have done little more than summarise the story presented by Herodotos. Diodoros, more-

Army 560-330 BC (Oxford 1992), 25. The above is merely a selection. The Hellenocentric view of Hanson is completely accepted by John Keegan, one of the most influential of modern military historians. It is perhaps for this reason that the theory ascribing the Greek victory against Persia to technological superiority combined with the tactic of the reckless charge has gained such wide currency: Keegan, J., *A History of Warfare* (London 2004 [Hutchinson, 1993]), 253-255.

5 In chronological order: Hdt. 9.19-70; Diod. 11.30-32; Plut. Ar. 14-19.

6 These points of criticism are almost guaranteed to be discussed in any work citing Herodotos; for a recent summary applied to the relevant part of the work, see Flower, M.A./J. Marincola (eds.), *Herodotus: Histories book IX* (Cambridge 2002).

7 Lazenby notes the difficulty of using Herodotos, but defends the use of his account on the basis that there is little else to work with: Lazenby, J.F., *The Defence of Greece 490-479 B.C.* (Warminster 1993), 5-17. Flower and Marincola ([as in n. 6], 20-21) contend that it is better to rely on Herodotos than to attempt to reconstruct an underlying ‘true’ history with the help of much later and even more doubtful sources.

over, seems to have dropped some essential parts of the narrative;⁸ Mardonios’ army also inexplicably loses and then gains several hundred thousand men in the course of the text.⁹ Overall, his version appears to be the least comprehensive and reliable; it should be used with extreme caution, if at all.¹⁰ Plutarch’s account is only somewhat more complete and clearly suffers from the author’s understandable but excessive focus on the role of his subject Aristides. However, it does have some merits worth considering, as various authors have pointed out.¹¹ Most importantly, he fleshes out some aspects of the military side of Herodotos’ description – the role of the Athenian archers, Pausanias’ response to the Persian assault, and the death of Mardonios. These will be noted as they become relevant below.

Generally speaking, then, the following analysis of the battle of Plataia will be based on Herodotos, with only occasional use of the other accounts where they provide items of interest. But this is not merely a matter of making do with an imperfect source. Herodotos appears to us as the origin of the claim that Greek weaponry won the day at Plataia; it is his description, with its caveats and contradictions, that must take centre stage here.

Arms and Armour of the Persians

In order to do justice to the events at Plataia it will be worthwhile first to examine the issue of the war gear itself. Herodotos laid the foundations of a long scholarly tradition of putting the blame for the final Persian defeat on their inability to fight effectively at close quarters. But this contradicts what we know of Persian combat equipment from every source we have – including Herodotos himself. How much should we really make of his statements on Persian arms, his claim that ‘what hurt them the most was that their outfits lacked armour’?¹²

The wealthy Persian nobles who fought as cavalry certainly went into battle wearing heavy protective gear.¹³ Herodotos’ tale of the death of Masistios suggests that the armour worn by prominent Persians could in some cases be so elaborate and comprehensive that

8 For instance, the Athenian archers are missing in his account of the first Persian cavalry attack: compare Hdt. 9.19-22 and Diod. 11.30.2-4. Later on, Diodoros seems to skip several days and neglects to mention the Greek retreat from their position in the plain: compare Hdt. 9.50-56 and Diod. 11.30.5-6. See also n.59 and n.62 below.

9 Diodoros estimates its size as more than four hundred thousand at 11.19.6; it drops to more than two hundred thousand at 11.28.4, and then rises again to about half a million at 11.30.1.

10 Lazenby calls his description of the battle ‘very confused’: *Defence* (as in n.7), 7.

11 Flower/Marincola (as in n. 6), 32-34; Wallace, P.W., ‘The Final Battle at Plataia’, *Hesperia supplement* 19 (Princeton 1982), 186 n.8, 188.

12 Hdt. 9.63.2; in this passage he claims they fought ‘like naked men (*gymnetes*) against hoplites’, after referring to them as ‘unequipped’ (*anoploi*) at 9.62.3.

13 Xen. *An.* 1.8.6; Briant, P., *Histoire de l’Empire Perse: de Cyrus à Alexandre* (Paris 1996), 553; Farrokh, *Shadows* (as in n. 4), 77; Head, D., *The Achaemenid Persian Army* (Stockport 1992), 31.

Greek hoplites were at a loss trying to pierce it at all.¹⁴ Of course, armour of such quality was an exception, and would not have been seen among the rank and file; but it must at least be accepted that Mardonios and his bodyguard would have entered the field well-protected. Mardonios' own death, crucial as it was for the course of the battle, should not be blamed on a lack of equipment.

As for the infantry, Herodotos himself describes their gear in rather straightforward terms.¹⁵ The Immortals, he says, wear cuirasses made of iron scales and carry *gerrha*, large wicker shields. The Medes in the army have a similar outfit, and troops from certain regions wear helmets for additional protection. Moreover, the quality of Persian armour left nothing to be desired – it may even be argued that a cuirass of iron scales would offer both better protection and greater mobility than the bronze bell cuirasses that Greek hoplites were famously equipped with.¹⁶ As for their shields, these were ‘of great lightness, yet of great resilience and rigidity’¹⁷; perhaps not as tough as the Greek *aspis*, but certainly not so flimsy as to leave the Persian infantryman essentially unprotected.

The real question, then, is not whether Persian soldiers wore armour, but why Herodotos insists they fought ‘like naked men’ in blatant disregard of his own words. Some scholars have tried to explain his statement by pointing out that the iron cuirasses mentioned would realistically have been worn only by a minority of the troops.¹⁸ If the greater part of the Persian force did not wear armour, it stands to reason that they could still be termed ‘unequipped’ compared to the heavily armoured hoplite array. Indeed it would seem reasonable not to overestimate the number of Persians wearing expensive suits of iron armour. However, this explanation is based on the assumption that Greek hoplites uniformly entered the field wearing the full hoplite panoply – helmet, cuirass, greaves and all. In reality, the number of hoplites thus equipped in the Archaic period probably did not exceed one in ten.¹⁹ This figure matches the ratio of scaled cuirass-wearing troops among the Immortals as estimated by Head.²⁰ There is no reason, then, to assume that the Greeks had an advantage in the field due to ‘tough individual armour’;²¹ the argument that the fin-

14 Hdt. 9.22.2-3; the Greeks finally managed to kill the pinned Masistios by stabbing him in the eye.

15 Hdt. 7.61.1-3; Farrokh, *Shadows* (as in n. 4), 76-77; Head, *Persian Army* (as in n. 13), 27, 29, plate 2; Khorasani, M. M., *Arms and Armour from Iran: the Bronze Age to the End of the Qajar Period* (Tübingen 2006), 267-268, 275-276; Lazenby, *Defence* (as in n. 7), 23; Sekunda, *Persian Army* (as in n. 4), 15-18; Wiesehöfer, J., *Das antike Persien von 550 v. Chr. bis 650 n. Chr.* (Munich 1994), 136-137.

16 Bittner, S., *Tracht und Bewaffnung des persischen Heeres zur Zeit der Achaimeniden* (Munich 1985), 166-170; Khorasani, *Arms and Armour* (as in n. 12), 275-276; Lazenby, *Defence* (as in n. 7), 23.

17 Sekunda, *Persian Army* (as in n. 4), 16-17.

18 Hignett, *Invasion* (as in n. 4), 43-45; Lazenby, *Defence* (as in n. 7), 23. Scaled cuirasses have been excavated in large numbers at Persepolis, but there is almost no trace of them in the Greek archaeological record, suggesting that few were captured from the invading army: Miller, M.C., *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century BC: a Study in Cultural Receptivity* (Cambridge 1997), 48-49.

19 Van Wees, H., *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities* (London 2004), 50, n. 10.

20 Head, *Persian Army* (as in n. 13), 27.

21 Farrokh, *Shadows* (as in n. 4), 82, 84; see also Flower/Marincola (as in n. 6), 27, 216-217; Holland, *Persian Fire* (as in n. 4), 353; Sekunda, *Persian Army* (as in n. 4), 25.

est equipment would only have been available to the wealthy few applies to both sides. It will not do to dismiss Herodotos’ mention of Persian armour on these grounds. The only kind of body armour that the Persians lacked was greaves – surely no fatal oversight, as these were entirely optional for the Greeks as well.²²

So what was the real difference between Greek and Persian war gear? Herodotos stresses that the Persians were handicapped in close-quarter fighting because their spears were shorter than those wielded by the Greeks,²³ but their actual length cannot be reconstructed with such categorical certainty. The length of Greek and Persian spears was not fixed. Both types appear to have ranged from about one hundred and eighty centimetres to in excess of two meters in length; the lack of uniformity forbids any generalisation on the matter.²⁴ Moreover, Herodotos’ contention that their spears gave the Greeks an advantage in battle may to some extent be an anachronism. The *doru* did not become mandatory hoplite equipment until after the Persian Wars. While the Persian Immortals were certainly all armed with thrusting spears as well as bows, some of the Greek heavy infantry would still have been equipped with pairs of light spears that could serve both as javelins and for hand-to-hand fighting.²⁵ It was in fact the Persians who were uniformly trained and equipped for close combat – such a doctrine had not come to dominate Greek minds yet.

With armour and edged weapons being therefore broadly comparable between the two armies, the only element upon which a judgment of ‘*anoploi*’ could rest is the shield. Traditional Persian infantry tactics involved a formation ten ranks deep of which only the first rank carried *gerrha*, tower shields meant to be set down as a shield wall. This allowed the Persians to act out a sequence of combined arms warfare in which the infantry could serve first as archers to weaken the enemy, and then as heavy infantry for the decisive clash.²⁶ The Greeks were not so organised; each man carried his own means of protection or hid behind another man’s shield if he could. Later sources indicate that the *aspis* was

22 Perhaps a third of the hoplites would have worn them, judging by the panoplies dedicated at Olympia: van Wees, Greek Warfare (as in n. 19), 50. The sheer discomfort of wearing greaves may help us understand their scarcity: Hanson, Western Way of War (as in n. 4), 76; Schwartz, Reinstating the Hoplite (as in n. 4), 76.

23 Hdt. 7.211.2.

24 Compare van Wees, Greek Warfare (as in n. 19), 48, and Head, Persian Army (as in n. 13), 27. Schwartz, upon stressing the difficulty of properly interpreting images in ancient art, proceeds to admit an almost total reliance on such pictorial evidence when it comes to spears, since there are obviously no archaeological remains to confirm our estimates: Schwartz, Reinstating the Hoplite (as in n. 4), 20-22. Since the authors above, analyzing the images known, give quite similar estimates for the length of Greek and Persian spears, I do not think it prudent simply to accept Herodotos’ statements on the matter. See also Flower/Marincola (as in n. 6), 218-219; Lazenby, Defence (as in n. 7), 23-24.

25 Van Wees, Greek Warfare (as in n. 19), 50-52.

26 Farrokh, Shadows (as in n. 4), 40; Head, Persian Army (as in n. 13), 22-23; Lazenby, Defence (as in n. 7), 31-32; Sekunda, Persian Army (as in n. 4), 16-18. The Persians did possess smaller metal-rimmed shields of hardened hide, but these appear to have been used only by palace guards: Khorasani, Arms and Armour (as in n. 15), 267-268.

the truly essential element of hoplite equipment. A soldier without it would indeed be seen as ‘unequipped’, one of the ‘naked ones’.²⁷

In light of this it seems reasonable to accept Kuhrt’s suggestion that Herodotos called the Persians ‘naked’ because they had set down their shields to form the shield wall.²⁸ This appears to be the only way to make sense of his assessment without contradicting his earlier passage on Persian arms. However, if it was indeed Herodotos’ intention to say that the Persians were helpless against hoplites because they fought without shields, this is again anachronistic for the late Archaic period, as we shall see – and it hardly serves to explain the course of the battle. Firstly, as Hunt puts it, ‘the full hoplite panoply was not a *sine qua non* of effective fighting in close formation.’²⁹ The lack of a shield could be balanced out by the presence of other, less burdening pieces of protective gear – for instance, an iron cuirass. Secondly, it was the Persians who formed a shield wall at Plataia, not the Greeks. This wall was the focal point of the initial clash, and even when it fell, the trained and well-equipped Immortals continued to put up a tenacious resistance until their undoubtedly well-armoured leader was killed.³⁰

It should come as no surprise that Starr, in his survey of Ancient Greek discourse on why they won the Persian Wars, never once mentions the relative merits of war gear.³¹ Apart from Herodotos and Aischylos, nobody seems to have played it up at all. Later Greek generals confronted Persians with confidence not because of their equipment but because they believed them to be of weaker will and constitution – the exact opposite of what Herodotos had claimed. Finally, Plutarch was downright offended by Herodotos’ statement that the Persians fought as *gymnetes*: ‘is there anything glorious or great left to the Greeks from these battles, if the Spartans fought with an unarmed enemy?’³² It is worth noting that his own account makes no mention of superior Greek equipment except as part of a rallying speech. It does not need to in order to explain the course of events. To Herodotos the Persians may have qualified as naked, but they were fully equipped for battle, and all Greeks knew that it took a fierce struggle to bring down the victors of Thermopylai.

27 Aristotle, *Ath.Pol.* 42.4; see also van Wees, *Greek Warfare* (as in n. 19), 48.

28 Kuhrt, A., *The Persian Empire: a Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (Abingdon 2007), 282.

29 Hunt, P., ‘Helots at the Battle of Plataea’, *Historia* 46 (1997), 140.

30 Hdt. 9.62-63. Similar Persian tactics again inflicted great losses on the Greeks at Mykale: Hdt. 9.102-103.2.

31 Starr, C.G., ‘Why did the Greeks defeat the Persians?’, Starr, C.G. (A. Ferrill/T. Kelly, eds.), *Essays on Ancient History: a Selection of Articles and Reviews* (Leiden 1979), 193-204. There is no mention of the issue in Jung’s recent analysis of Greek remembrance of the battle: Jung, M., *Marathon und Plataia: zwei Persenschlachten als “lieux de mémoire” im antiken Griechenland* (Göttingen 2006), 225-297, 386-397.

32 Plut. *On the Malice of Herodotos*, 43.3-4 (*Mor.* 874A).

Military Practice in the Age of Mardonios

To give some idea of how the battle was fought, it must be established, not simply how the two armies that met at Plataia were differently equipped, but how they were forced by their tactical nature to respond to one another. The myth of strong Greek hoplite versus weak Persian foot archer produces ubiquitous white noise on this subject and it will be useful to attempt to filter it out.

On an individual level, Classical Greek authors famously depict the Persians as effeminate and weak³³ - a mass of untrained meat to be fed to the grinder.³⁴ Yet Herodotos explicitly states that the Persian foot at Plataia lacked neither strength nor courage.³⁵ In reality, Greek commanders of the early fifth century knew better than to underestimate Persian soldiers. To date, no less than five pitched battles involving some number of hoplites and Persian infantry had been won by the latter.³⁶ It is widely accepted that the Greeks took confidence from their victory at Marathon, but this was the only time they had ever managed to defeat a Persian force, and it must be remembered that even on that occasion the Persian elite still managed to shatter the centre of the Greek line. The Persians would have seen no reason at all to consider themselves incapable of dealing with hoplites. Mardonios’ army was built around a core of professional soldiers who, unlike the Greeks, were quite probably trained and certainly battle-hardened; he had every reason to be confident of their abilities.³⁷ Indeed, not long before the clash at Plataia, Mardonios brashly dared the Spartans to engage in a kind of Battle of the Champions, in which his Immortals would face them on even terms. The Spartans, however, refused to leave the safety of the Greek host.³⁸ This shows on the one hand that the Persian commander was not intimidated by Greek prowess in close combat, while on the other hand the Spartans

33 For instance at Xen. *Ag.* 1.28 and by unfavourable comparison to Greeks at Xen. *An.* 1.7.3.

34 Hanson, *Western Way of War* (as in n. 4), 13.

35 They were ‘neither the less valorous nor the weaker’: Hdt. 9.62.3. Later on (at 9.71.1) Herodotos stresses that ‘among the barbarians those who fought the best were the Persian infantry’.

36 Namely, apart from Thermopylai, the battles of Pelousion (525 BC), Ephesos (498 BC), the river Marsyas (497 BC) and Labraunda (497 BC): Lazenby, *Defence* (as in n. 7), 32-33, 43-44. Flower and Marincola ([as in n. 6], 191-192) believe there may be truth to Herodotos’ statement (at 9.46.1) that Pausanias feared the Persians; the Spartans had only faced them once, and they had been utterly destroyed. Herodotos himself (7.211) interprets Thermopylai as proof of the strength of the hoplite, but it is undeniable that the Greeks were outmaneuvered and defeated. There is no sign in the later narrative that the confidence of Persian infantry was shaken by the clash (though Xerxes is said to have hidden Persian bodies from his sailors when they came to see the battlefield: 8.24-25) . See also below, n. 64.

37 Hdt. 8.100.2-4; Lazenby, *Defence* (as in n. 7), 43-44. On this topic Hignett (*Invasion* (as in n. 4), 335) follows Herodotos’ claim that the Persians, rather than the Greeks, were lacking in ‘military skill’ – an odd statement, considering that the Spartans were the only professional soldiers in the Greek host, and none of them had seen battle.

38 Hdt. 9.48; this will be discussed in more detail below and at n. 66.

were not confident enough of their individual superiority to take on the cream of the Persian army in a fair engagement.

The combat equipment and battlefield function of the Persian Immortals has already been broadly sketched above. While most of them were primarily armed with bows, all were fully equipped and capable of fighting hand-to-hand; the stereotypical image of the unprotected foot archer does not seem to be supported much by the evidence. Of the Greek hoplite something similar may be said. It would do no justice to our sources to assume that all Greeks at Plataia fought as heavily armoured spearmen. As we have seen, the famed ‘men of bronze’ were the exception rather than the rule; most hoplites would have been rather more modestly equipped. Evidence from vase paintings and the like further indicates that arming oneself with one’s weapon of choice was still very much a possibility, and not even the characteristic *aspis* or hoplite shield was really universal yet.³⁹ The soldiers Herodotos covers with the blanket term of ‘hoplites’ would in truth have included many different kinds of fighters – and some of these may even have counted as peltasts to later authors.⁴⁰ Their formation would by necessity have been comparatively open, and the fighting style of the Greek army as a whole would not fit our idea of how Greek infantry typically fought. Indeed, this is exactly the impression given by Herodotos’ account.⁴¹ It is right not to overstate just how much of a hoplite the average Greek infantryman was.

Man for man, then, the finest Greek fighters of the time realistically would not have rated themselves higher than their Persian counterparts at Plataia. As has been touched upon in the previous section, the challenge they faced was made all the more daunting by the fact that the Persians were wholly superior in terms of infantry organisation and tactical ability. Spartans aside, the Greek soldiers of the Persian Wars were amateurs; they received no training and could perform only the most basic battlefield manoeuvres.⁴² Their line was not so much a formation of heavy infantry as it was a crowd of warriors. The Persian elite, on the other hand, seems to have consisted of specialist heavy infantry led by a developed officer hierarchy. Their established tactic of thinning out enemy lines with arrow fire before overrunning them seemed to guarantee success against a stationary opponent with a lack of trained missile units to provide cover.⁴³

39 Van Wees, *Greek Warfare* (as in n. 19), 50-52.

40 It is arguable that at least in Xenophon’s time there was an undefined grey area between light hoplites and peltasts, causing some troops to be counted in different categories at different times: Xen. *An.* 1.2.9, 1.7.10.

41 The apparent nature of late Archaic hoplite battle will be discussed in the next section.

42 Van Wees, *Greek Warfare* (as in n. 19), 90; see also Pritchett, W.K., *The Greek State at War II* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1974), 209-212. Save for the unlikely story of the double swapping of flanks (Hdt. 9.46-47; Plut. *Ar.* 16.5-6), the maneuvers attempted by the Greeks at Plataia tended to end in total confusion. Lazenby’s harsh but realistic judgment of Greek military skill (*Defence* [as in n. 7], 14-15, 33, 36-38) seems very much at odds with his description of a coherent Greek phalanx practically invulnerable to Persian attacks.

43 Farrokh, *Shadows* (as in n. 4), 40; Lazenby, *Defence* (as in n. 7), 31-32, 249, 253; Sekunda, *Persian Army* (as in n. 4), 4-7.

These problems were compounded further by the fact that the Persian army also deployed large numbers of cavalry. Against these horsemen the hoplites had no defence.⁴⁴ While a closed phalanx could potentially hold out indefinitely against shock cavalry as long as it maintained cohesion, there was nothing it could do against horsemen armed with missiles; the Persian horsemen’s charges took the form of repeated missile attacks with jabs at the fringes of an enemy formation, denying enemy infantry a chance to come to grips. As attrition mounted and morale fell, the target would eventually disintegrate. Not even a closed phalanx had any hope of surviving the onslaught.⁴⁵ As the prelude to Plataia makes clear, the hoplites were entirely at the mercy of the elite Persian horse, whether they were drawn up for battle or not.⁴⁶ Pausanias’ exhausted footsoldiers, forced by the threat of the cavalry to march at night and in broken ground, were picked off in large numbers by the swarming enemy horse. The mobility of the cavalry further allowed the Persians to put them to strategic use by severing the Greek supply lines. Our sources from later periods leave no room for doubt: the Greeks feared specialist horsemen so much that every successful struggle against them, significant or not, tended to be described as a great achievement.⁴⁷ Greek helplessness against cavalry is rightly identified by Cawkwell as a potentially war-winning advantage for the Persians⁴⁸ - meaning that every battle the Greeks fought against the Persians hinged on whether they could find a way to nullify that advantage. No victory was ever guaranteed through inherent factors; hoplite armies were far from invulnerable.

The presence of cavalry in Mardonios’ army, and the effect this had on the events, leads to two important points of criticism against the statement that Plataia proved the superiority of one infantry type over another. Firstly, the battles of the Persian Wars were not strictly heavy infantry affairs; cavalry opened the battle of Plataia and continued to play an important part in its aftermath.⁴⁹ Secondly, if we are to regard the battle as ‘a match

44 Xen. *Ag.* 1.23; *An.* 2.4.6, 2.5.17, 3.1.2, 3.2.18, 3.3.8-9, 3.4.24; Diod. 14.36.3; Plut. *Ag.* 9.4.

45 Hdt. 9.18.1; Flower/Marincola (as in n. 6), 134, 136. Hignett (*Invasion* [as in n. 4], 45, 300-301, 336) and Lazenby (*Defence* [as in n. 7], 221, 240) maintain that Persian cavalry could not break a formed phalanx, but this causes problems in their own arguments. If Persian cavalry was really impotent against hoplites in battle formation, it would make no sense that the Greek army retreated for fear of them (as Hignett accepts: *Invasion* [as in n. 4], 323-237), or that Mardonios could hope to force the Greek hand with his cavalry (as Lazenby supposes: *Defence* [as in n. 7], 221, 232-233). In truth, even if we are to imagine a fully developed hoplite phalanx at Plataia, its strength must not be overstated – when Mardonios pretends to attack his Greek allies (Hdt. 9.17-18) his cavalry swiftly surrounds them, after which the hoplites see no options left but to prepare to die where they stand.

46 Hdt. 9.17-18, 21.3, 23.2, 49-50, 56.

47 Hdt. 9.25.1; for later examples, see Xen. *An.* 3.4.4-5; *Ag.* 1.31-32 (= *Hell.* 3.4.23-24), 2.5; Plut. *Ag.* 16.5. See also *Hell.Oxy.* (ed. P. MacKechnie/S.J. Kern [Warminster 1988]), 11.4-6, in which ambush tactics are employed against enemy cavalry for lack of troops fast enough to overtake them.

48 Cawkwell, *The Greek Wars* (as in n. 2), 115. The author plausibly argues (*ibid.*, 88-89) that the battle of Marathon was in fact a surprise attack on a withdrawing enemy; the Greeks refused to engage until they were sure the enemy cavalry would play no part in the fighting.

49 Hdt. 9.59, 66-69.

between spear and bow', then for the longest time it seemed as though the bow was the superior weapon. Armed with bows and javelins the Persian horsemen could easily avoid the spears of the Greek infantry while inflicting massive casualties upon them. Likewise, the Persian infantry, when they entered the fray, immediately caused great harm to the Spartans, helpless as these were for lack of long-ranged weapons of their own.⁵⁰ The Persians also cleverly used the bow as a form of area control, denying the Greeks access to fresh water by keeping the bank of the Asopos within bowshot.⁵¹

Had the Greek army consisted exclusively of hoplites, it might eventually have succumbed to the endless barrage of missile fire brought down on it by the Persians. But this was certainly not the case at Plataia. Despite the disdain reserved for them in Thucydides and others,⁵² light infantry armed with missile weapons certainly had their own place in Greek warfare; according to Herodotos they outnumbered the hoplites almost two to one at Plataia.⁵³ Sadly the account does not allow us to reconstruct any part of their actions during the battle, but this must not lead us to assume that they did not act. More to the point, there was no homogenous hoplite phalanx during the Persian Wars.⁵⁴ It was not just the hoplite body itself that was varied; in the late Archaic period the separation between light and heavy infantry was not yet absolute, meaning that the Greek phalanx during the battle of Plataia was in fact to some extent a mixed formation in which missile troops sought protection behind the shields of the hoplites. Herodotos' mention of helot casualties both at Plataia and earlier at Thermopylai testifies to this.⁵⁵ Whatever the form this formation would take in practice,⁵⁶ such a phalanx would not have been entirely helpless against enemy light troops.

Furthermore, Pausanias himself seems to have been well aware of the weaknesses of his heavy infantry and the advantage that a few bows could bring. To stop Mardonios' cavalry in the initial skirmishes on the plain of the Asopos, the Greeks sent a picked force of hoplites plus an Athenian corps of archers – and it was these archers who managed to

50 Hdt. 9.61.3; compare Thuc. 3.97.3-98.3, 4.34.3; Xen. *An.* 3.3.7. There is no reason to assume, as Seibt did (*Griechische Söldner* [as in n. 4], 122, 134), that the bow was ineffectual against hoplites.

51 Hdt. 9.50.

52 Thuc. 4.126.5, 6.69.2; Van Wees, *Greek Warfare* (as in n. 19), 61, 64-65.

53 Hdt. 9.28-30; the figure is disputed, but it is plain that large numbers of light troops were present at the battle. These men should not be casually dismissed as ineffective, as some authors do (for instance Holland, *Persian Fire* (as in n. 4), 344 n. 48; Lazenby, *Defence* (as in n. 4) 228). Hunt, 'Helots' (as in n. 29), 130, 141, even argues that the nature of Persian forces would actually make light infantry *more* effective against them than hoplites.

54 Van Wees, *Greek Warfare*, (as in n. 19), 181-183. He argues that the type of combat Herodotos describes may be qualified as practically Homeric, due to hints at an open battle formation and reports of the exploits of individual heroes. See also n. 65 below.

55 Hdt. 8.25.2, 9.85.1; see also Plut. *Ar.* 14.3, where the Athenian archers are said to 'mingle' with the hoplites.

56 Hunt has suggested an eight-rank phalanx of which only the front rank consisted of hoplites: 'Helots' (as in n. 29), 132-134. However, this is highly improbable; for one thing, the resulting Lakedaimonian phalanx would be ten to twenty kilometers wide – something rather difficult to image on the battlefield of Plataia.

wound the Persian commander’s horse, turning the skirmish into a pitched battle.⁵⁷ At the start of the battle proper, the Spartan wing of the line was charged by the Persians; Pausanias promptly sent a message to his Athenian allies saying that, if they could not make it to their aid in force, they should at least send their archers.⁵⁸

With all this in mind, it is difficult to avoid an overall impression of Greeks forced to take desperate measures and rely on troops of inferior status to make up for the fact that the Persians were holding all the cards. The invaders had the upper hand in terms of tactical speed, range, flexibility, and the ability to cause damage. As amateur soldiers and as hoplites, the Greeks were practically helpless against missile fire and horsemen. They were unable to do anything about Mardonios’ complete domination of the battlefield. Even against the Persian heavy infantry alone, they did not feel certain of victory. How did these Greeks manage to win the battle of Plataia?

Plataia: the Eastern Way of War

It is apparent from the account of Herodotos that Mardonios faced a very difficult situation in 479. He had been left in Greece with the cream of the Persian army, ordered to make short work of the remaining Greek resistance; now the Greek land army had finally gathered against him in the plain of Boeotia, and his options were limited.

Herodotos claims that the Persian army at Plataia numbered over three hundred thousand,⁵⁹ but it seems reasonable to doubt that figure. Cawkwell points to several indications in Herodotos that ‘Mardonios’ army was not much greater than the Greek hoplite array.’⁶⁰ Most important among these indications is the fact that when the armies face each other there is no mention of flank overlap on either side of the Greek line. Herodotos mentions, of course, that the Persians were drawn up in deeper formation because they greatly outnumbered their opponents – but in its context that statement does not make sense.⁶¹ The passage in question describes the deployment of Mardonios’ army; wishing to match his best against the finest of the Greeks, Mardonios positioned his Persians – and only his Persians – against the Lakedaimonian hoplites. The Medes and other elements of his army were deployed against other Greeks. We know from the earlier passage listing Mardonios’ forces that the Persians under his command, cavalry aside, were the Immortals, and no one else. Hence, going by Herodotos’ own figures, Mardonios deployed ten thousand Persians against ten thousand Lakedaimonians. How could the Persians then find themselves outnumbering their opponents?

57 Hdt. 9.22.2; Plut. *Ar.* 14.1-3.

58 Hdt. 9.60.

59 Hdt. 8.113, 9.31-32.

60 Cawkwell, *The Greek Wars* (as in n. 2), 101-103, 249-251; see also Flower/Marincola (as in n. 6), 163; Hignett, *Invasion* (as in n. 4), 354-355, 438.

61 Compare Hdt. 8.113.2, 9.28 and 9.31.2-4.

In fact, the Persian deployment just cited seems to suggest that the two armies at Plataia were more or less evenly matched. If Mardonios did enjoy a numerical advantage, it is odd that he chose not to extend his line; the Persians were obviously aware of the advantages of striking an enemy in the flank or rear.⁶² Diodoros states that the Greeks chose the terrain at Plataia deliberately to prevent being outflanked and to deny the Persians the advantage of numbers, but it has been noted that the entirety of his account is rather doubtful. In his version the Greeks did battle from a position which Herodotos says they had been forced to abandon. Persian cavalry had managed to get around them and poison their water supply – not greatly impeded, apparently, by the presence of protective geographical features.⁶³ All evidence points to a Persian willingness and ability to outflank their enemies, with a lack of excess troops preventing them from actually doing so. The deep formation envisioned by Herodotos and Diodoros may be no more than an invention serving to explain where, if not in a huge overlapping flank, the Persians had hidden the supposed vastness of their army.

It may be possible to go even further than this. As has been mentioned above, Mardonios challenged the Spartans at Plataia to an engagement with even numbers, Spartan hoplite versus Persian Immortal. Though he was probably very confident of his elite's abilities, it is difficult to believe that he would have preferred a match of this kind. Thermopylai had shown that – given the vastly advantageous defensive position the Spartans had held – the only way the Immortals could gain victory was by using their superior numbers to surround them.⁶⁴ Of course, this option was not beyond Persian means, and the way they dealt with determined enemies in strong positions shows the versatility of their forces; both at Thermopylai and in the overture to Plataia, they used manoeuvre and speed to dislodge their static enemies once direct assault had proven fruitless. But this required more than a rough parity of troops. Mardonios would be taking an unreasonable risk if he actually *gave up* the numerical advantage he supposedly had – unless the truth was that he feared Greek numbers more than Spartan skill. Indeed, we find Herodotos stating repeatedly that the Persians feared the size of the Greek army.⁶⁵ Concrete evidence is lacking, but it may well have been the Persians who were outnumbered at Plataia.⁶⁶

62 As they famously did at Thermopylai: Hdt. 7.213-215. The Greek deployment at Marathon, with its strong wings and weak centre, seems to have served specifically to deny the Persians this chance: Hdt. 6.111.4. At Kounaxa the Persian King's only tactical manoeuvre was an attempt to exploit his superior numbers by enveloping Cyrus' left flank: Xen. *An.* 1.8.23.

63 Compare Diod. 11.30.5-6 and Hdt. 9.50, 56.

64 Hdt. 7.211. The nature of the terrain at Thermopylai made Persian victory through head-on assault impossible. Yet, once they found a way to surround the enemy force, Spartan resistance was swiftly broken, which is why the Persians had no reason to lose confidence in their elite infantry. There is an interesting parallel between this battle and the final phase of the fighting on Sphakteria some fifty-five years later: Thuc. 4.35-38.

65 Hdt. 9.38.2, 41.1, 41.3, 45.2. Plutarch has it that the Greek army was still growing at this point: Plut. *Ar.* 15.1.

66 Flower and Marincola ([as in n. 6], 193) point out that Mardonios' 'empty boasting' to the Spartans fits his characterization as rash and impetuous by Herodotos, and reject the passage as unhistorical.

This state of affairs, combined with the knowledge that the Greeks could do little or nothing against cavalry attacks, prescribed a Persian strategy of protracted war: one in which Greek numbers would be gradually depleted and Greek morale gradually worn down by constant harassment and denial of water and supplies. Initial Greek inactivity in the face of this threat could well be explained by their desire to bait the Persians into an all-out attack; they had trouble coordinating their massive army and may have hoped that a Persian strike across the Asopos and into hilly terrain would work to their advantage.⁶⁷ Their strategy, however, ended up only helping Mardonios, whose horsemen wreaked havoc on the Greeks for days. Mardonios appears to have made all the right moves to exploit Greek immobility, tactical limitations and inexperience controlling an army as vast as the one gathered at Plataia. Yet the Greeks would not be routed. Both sides eventually ran out of supplies; it was the Persians who acted upon it.⁶⁸ Mardonios, faced with a stubbornly united enemy, had no choice but to force a decisive engagement. When he found that the Greeks had left their camp in seeming flight to a new position, he seized his chance.

His assault landed on a Greek column in serious disarray. Pausanias’ attempted nocturnal retreat had ended in chaos as his centre essentially fled the battlefield while his right at first refused to move at all.⁶⁹ Mardonios must have realised that the Greeks’ apparent lack of a coherent defensive line meant a chance to deal with them piecemeal. The Persian core of his army directly engaged the Spartans while his Greek allies prevented the Athenians from coming to their aid.⁷⁰ Spartan defence was at first non-existent; they took time to obtain favourable omens for battle even as the Persian arrows rained down on them. When, at last, the Tegeans charged, the Spartans found the desired signs and followed suit.⁷¹

However, they accept that both Xerxes and Mardonios were confident of victory in the campaign of 479, *after* the battle of Thermopylai (ibid., 29). It seems too easy to dismiss the challenge altogether, especially since it was in the interest of both armies at Plataia to try to provoke the other into making rash decisions.

- 67 Hignett in particular insists that the Greeks believed they held superior ground: *Invasion* (as in n. 4), 45, 51, 55, 308-309, 311, 321. However, as discussed above, the passage at Diod. 11.30.6 where this is explicitly stated should not be taken at face value.
- 68 Hdt. 9.45, 50; Cawkwell, *The Greek Wars*, 114-115. The passage in Herodotos is often dismissed because the context – a secret message from Alexander of Macedon – is highly suspect. However, somewhat earlier in the narrative (Hdt. 9.41) the Persians themselves are also shown worrying about their supplies. While there is not much ground for accepting Herodotos’ account of a discussion among Persian leaders, the size of the armies gathered at Plataia still makes supply problems for both sides highly plausible. See also Thuc. 6.33.5; Flower/Marincola (as in n. 6), 22. Hignett (*Invasion* [as in n. 4], 319-320) suggests a different reason for Mardonios’ eagerness to give battle: the Greek victory at Salamis and ensuing naval offensive may well have formed a threat to his line of communications and retreat.
- 69 Hdt. 9.51-58; Flower/Marincola (as in n. 6), 25, 200-201.
- 70 Hdt. 9.59-61.1, 67. It is worth noting Plutarch’s addition that Pausanias failed to give the signal to prepare for all-out battle, making the deployment of the other Greeks a rather chaotic affair: Plut. *Ar.* 17.5, 18.4-5.
- 71 Hdt. 9.61.3-62.1.

The Persians had by this time made the most of their advantage as missile troops. True to form, they had set up their wall of shields from behind which the infantry could continue to use their bows until the enemy reached it. But the shield wall was more than a mere makeshift fortification; it was a sign that the Persians intended to stand and fight – which may be why Herodotos could find no fault with their courage at this point. They never meant to act like the light-armed troops in the famous passages of Thucydides and Xenophon.⁷² Their spear-armed ranks were deep; they were set to face down a charge. The description of hand-to-hand combat at the temple of Demeter, though, seems altogether different from the familiar image of Classical hoplite battle – not to mention the charge of ‘ordered squares’ imagined by Hanson.⁷³ If the Spartan counterattack was a sustained phalanx charge, how could the Persian infantry have room to engage them in small groups, one or ten men at a time? How could the deeds of lone Greek heroes stand out?

The probable nature of the phalanx at this time, combined with the words of Herodotos, point to the likely assumption that Plataia was not in fact a hoplite battle of the kind we know from the Classical age.⁷⁴ The Spartans did not maintain pressure on the Persians but apparently formed an almost defensive formation, allowing their enemies to come ahead in squads to be defeated. It should come as no surprise that this battle ‘went on for a long time’.⁷⁵ Slowly, due to the undoubtedly constant use of missile weapons by the rear ranks and the irregular heavy infantry clashes that erupted along the line, both sides were worn down – but the Greeks, again, refused to break. The Persian elite gathered around Mardonios was certainly far outnumbered locally by the Spartans; they killed many of their enemies until a rock thrown by a desperate Spartan brought Mardonios down.⁷⁶

72 Thuc. 3.97.3-98.3, 4.32.4, 4.33.2; Xen. *An.* 3.4.25-27; Xen. *Hell.* 4.5.15-17.

73 Hdt. 9.62; cf. Hanson, *Western Way of War* (as in n. 4), 10; Holland, *Persian Fire* (as in n. 4), 350-353. For a reconstruction more in line with the evidence, see van Wees, *Greek Warfare* (as in n. 19), 181. It is useful to bear in mind Hunt’s remark, cited above (n. 29) that ‘the full hoplite panoply was not a *sine qua non* of effective fighting in close formation’ – a closed phalanx is not a necessary precondition to explain the scene described by Herodotos. Again, we should not assume the existence of a homogenous hoplite phalanx at Plataia.

74 Herodotos (7.211.2-3) says the Spartans used skirmishing tactics and feints at Thermopylai, and Plato (*Laches* 191C) claims the same for Plataia, though this is not generally accepted as historical. Van Wees (*Greek Warfare* [as in n. 19], 180) suggests that this is how the still-Archaic phalanx of the early fifth century may have actually fought.

75 Admittedly it is not clear what this phrase actually means – the difficulty of understanding it properly is discussed in Schwartz, *Reinstating the Hoplite* (as in n. 4), 202-205. However, Schwartz concedes that the words of Herodotos apply only to the clash of heavy infantry, and therefore probably do imply a protracted struggle.

76 Hdt. 9.63; the manner of Mardonios’ death is an addition by Plutarch, which is not at all improbable and illustrates the chaotic nature of the clash: Plut. *Ar.* 19.1.

His death caused the morale of his bodyguards to plummet beyond repair.⁷⁷ When they routed, the entire Persian army went with them.⁷⁸

At this point the battle was not over yet. The Athenians still had to dispatch the tenacious Thebans deployed against them, and the as yet unused Persian cavalry made sure the Greeks could not freely pursue the routing enemy army. It is unclear from the narrative what exactly prevented the cavalry from playing a part in the battle proper, but possibly they were not expected to, having already played their part in the traditional Persian sequence of field engagements.⁷⁹ Alternatively, the horsemen may have been held back specifically to stamp out any Greek attempt at manoeuvre. This is certainly what they did; a reckless detachment of Greeks caught out of formation was promptly wiped out by Thessalian mounted troops.⁸⁰ Yet, in the end, the Persians were chased back to their fortified camp; after a bitter fight to breach the walls, the camp was taken and the Persian army melted away.⁸¹ It left behind a valley full of Persian and Spartan corpses.⁸²

There does not appear to be any reason to bring arguments of technology or fighting skill into the discussion in order to explain the Greek victory. In short, the Persians did not enjoy much of a numerical advantage, or at least not at the critical point; a fixed-sequence tactical doctrine, broken ground and fear of enemy numbers kept them from putting their cavalry to full use in the clash. They nevertheless fought effectively against the Spartans until their mounting casualties coupled with the loss of their leader became too much for them. The Greeks did not win because some of them may have been better armoured, but simply because they managed to outlast their enemies and break their morale – in the campaign as a whole as well as during the battle. It was their continued coherence and fighting spirit, despite the heavy losses suffered, that made them the last men standing at Plataia.⁸³

77 Hdt. 9.63, 65.1; Diod. 11.31.2. The loss of a general is often fatal for an army, as Plutarch warns: Plut. *Pel.* 1.5, 2.4. Kounaxa is another example of this phenomenon, as can be glanced from Xen. *An.* 1.9.31.

78 Hdt. 9.68.1. Again, armies falling apart when their elite unit routed were common in antiquity, for instance at Leuktra (Plut. *Pel.* 23; Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.13-14) and at the Krimesos (Plut. *Tim.* 18.4-5).

79 Farrokh, *Shadows* (as in n. 4), 40.

80 Hdt. 9.68.2-69.

81 According to Herodotos (9.70) they were butchered almost to a man, but Cawkwell supposes that they fled to Thessaly instead: *The Greek Wars* (as in n. 2), 115 n. 64.

82 With Herodotos' repeated mention of severe losses suffered by the Spartans (9.49, 61.3, 63, 70), his own estimate of the total Greek casualties (a mere one hundred and sixty: 9.70.7) is incredible. The figure is too low even if it only includes the men lost during the meleé with the Immortals, as Flower and Marincola suggest ([as in n. 6], 140). Plutarch himself already found it 'astonishing' (*Ar.* 19.5). However, nothing in the known descriptions of the battle allows us to say with certainty whether the figures presented by him (thirteen hundred and sixty: *Ar.* 19.4) or Diodoros (more than ten thousand: 11.33.1) are closer to the truth.

83 The cohesion and high morale of the Greek army is recognized as its great strength at Plataia by both Hanson (*Western Way of War* [as in n. 4], 117-120) and van Wees (*Greek Warfare* [as in n. 19], 181), yet somehow neither author puts this factor above hoplite equipment in relative importance.

Conclusion

Many modern accounts of the wars between Greece and Persia still contain traces of the dominant bias in the Greek sources we have. Even Cawkwell, whose criticism of Herodotos is well-reasoned throughout, allowed one such piece of slanted information to slip through his net. The battle of Plataia, says Herodotos, was won because the Persians had no armour; it was a struggle of hoplites against unequipped men. This proved decisively, says Cawkwell, that the hoplite was superior to all Persian infantry.

This is a severe oversimplification of the military realities of the early fifth century BC. As we have seen, the veteran Persian Immortals did not fear the hoplite, nor did the Spartans wish to risk an even battle to prove their mettle. In practice, even if Persian infantry would technically count as ‘naked’ to Herodotos, they were equipped for hand-to-hand fighting and never easily overcome when they chose to fight. Furthermore, the Persians did not rely exclusively on their infantry to win their battles – unlike the Greeks. Persian mounted forces were a serious threat to their enemies at Plataia, who could do very little about their constant attacks and were forced to dance to their tune even after they had overcome Mardonios’ infantry elite. The bow, often derided as useless against well-armoured hoplites, appears to have been the bane of the Greeks; their own lack of sufficient numbers of archers meant that they were forced to worry about their water supply, forced to adapt constantly to Persian initiatives, and forced to charge the Persian shield wall or perish.

The outcome of the battle of Plataia was the result of a combination of logistical, tactical and psychological factors. If Mardonios even enjoyed numerical superiority, it certainly was not great; his lack of supplies forced him nevertheless to engage the Greek army, which so far had suffered greatly from his tactics but refused to quit the field in despair. He chose to attack when he found his opponents scattered and confused, manoeuvring clumsily to safer ground to escape Mardonios’ cavalry. His archers caused serious damage to the main part of their army. Even after the Spartan counterattack, things still seemed to be looking up for the Persians, who had suffered no losses yet; their ten-deep formation made them well suited for a grinding match even if they could not outflank the enemy. They found a reliable ally in the Thebans, who kept the other Greeks from interfering with their struggle.

However, the Greeks, true to the ideals of their culture,⁸⁴ did not acknowledge the hopelessness of their situation. They fought on against the better judgment of any rational observer. In the end their persistence paid off; they managed to kill Mardonios and the majority of his bodyguard, after which the Persian army’s resolve crumbled. Persian power was not yet broken, but the battle had been won.

Clearly there is no need for debates on the length of spears or the size of shields here. The Persians indeed lacked neither strength nor courage; their skill and equipment left

84 It is telling that Herodotos judges the Persian performance at Plataia by saying they ‘had fought no fight to the end nor achieved any feat of arms’: Hdt. 9.67.3. Plutarch actually *praises* the Spartans for stoically enduring Persian arrow fire while they waited for the omens to improve: Plut. *Ar.* 17.7.

nothing to be desired. They could count combat experience, speed and mobility among the advantages they had over the Greeks. What the Greeks brought in to counter this was the first beginning of tactical ingenuity on their part, in the form of the Athenian archers, but mostly a stubbornly defiant mindset that allowed them to endure relentless punishment without breaking. Their morale, despite days of increasing scarcity of supplies, harassment by cavalry attacks, lack of drinkable water, night marches and conflicts in the high command, did not drop to a critical level. Perhaps this was a feature of the hoplite ethic; perhaps it was because the Greeks were fighting for their independence; whatever the case, they held out at the temple of Demeter until the Persians could not stand it anymore.

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