

The better part of the
battle of
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recounter's success
is due to hero...

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Herodotus's Thermopylae: A Successful Rendering of History

Here I intend to write about the success of Herodotus's account of the battle of Thermopylae. The first step toward evaluating his success is to determine by what standard we should judge his work. Herodotus himself begins his *Researches* by stating his goal: "to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of other peoples and to describe how the Greeks and the Persians came into conflict." Note that he does not say that he intends to preserve every fact and every detail of history. Rather, he intends to preserve the details of history that he considers to be most important, i. e. the amazing achievements on both sides of the conflict. He wants to make sure that history does not forget these great deeds nor the importance of this conflict. Therefore, when Herodotus tells his story, he gives equal value to both the accuracy of the facts and the enormosity of the story. He wants to preserve the facts, but even more importantly, he wants to make sure that readers understand the overall significance of those facts. He succeeds in both regards.

Herodotus uses a number of tactics to make his story more memorable for his audience. He tells the story of Thermopylae like any great story, with the result that the details he gives to his audience cannot all be objectively true. For example, he often gives direct quotations, some of which must have taken place in private counsel between a few individuals. He cannot possibly have known exactly what those individuals said, including the phrasing they used. But this is a stylistic decision Herodotus makes – he chooses to tell his story in a way that will captivate his audience's interest, and his audience

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most likely would rather hear a direct quotation from Demarethus himself than just a summary of what he probably said (209-210, “ Ἡκουσας . . . ἀρίστους”). Herodotus often adds other anecdotes that interest his audience but that he cannot have known for sure, such as that Xerxes leaped up three times from his throne, fearing for his army, during one of the early skirmishes before the battle (212, “ ἐν ταύτησι . . . στρατιῇ”). This bit of lore is unlikely, but Herodotus uses it to prove his point that the Greeks did much better than the Persian army during these early stages of the battle. Herodotus sometimes chooses to use unverifiable details in order to make his larger point more powerfully.

At other times, however, Herodotus’s precision is admirable. For example, he excels in topography, taking note of exactly where each army set up its camp by Thermopylae and exactly what the region of the battle looked like. Most importantly, Herodotus does a thorough job of explaining how the Persian army gained their victory when they were alerted of the existence of a mountain pass of which the Greeks were not aware (217, “ κατὰ ταύτην . . . Τρηχινίων”). He also strives for accuracy in determining who it was that alerted the Persians that this mountain pass existed. He believes that it was Ephialtes, but he takes the time to mention another theory, that it may have actually been Onetas and Corydallus, and he examines both theories before concluding that Ephialtes must have been the culprit (214, “ ἔστι δὲ . . . γράφω”). Here Herodotus shows a dedication to the truth where he judges that it really counts.

Herodotus takes great pains to make his story accurate when he talks about aspects of the battle that he considers to be of great importance, such as the topography of the battle, and the identity of the man who betrayed the Greeks by telling the Persians about the mountain pass. A modern historian might condemn Herodotus for including unverifiable or even unlikely anecdotes. However, the accuracy of each individual anecdote is not of great concern to Herodotus. He aims to preserve the impressive achievements that took place in the battle, rather than the minutiae of the battle itself. He lives up to his own personal goals: he records the great achievements both of the Greeks and of the Persians, and he tells them in a way that his audience will find compelling and memorable. Thus, he preserves the story of Thermopylae for the knowledge of all those that come after him.