

Herodotus on the Role of the Spartans and Thespians in the Battle of Thermopylae

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Abstract. *The article examines sources that mention a detachment of seven hundred hoplites from the Boeotian city of Thespieae, who, together with three hundred Spartans, took part in the Battle of Thermopylae and died heroically (480 BC). The author analyzes the reasons for the complete or partial hushing up of the role of the Thespians in the heroic resistance to the Persians. Already in Herodotus, the Spartan tradition completely dominates in his story about this battle. The concentration of attention on the Spartans is explained by the firm intention of Spartan ideologists to glorify the feat of Leonidas and his detachment exclusively, leaving the merits of the Thespians in the shadows. The Spartans' efforts were not in vain: the European tradition has taken root in the idea of the Spartans as the only heroes of Thermopylae.*

The article attempts to explain why the Thespians turned out to be the only allied detachment that voluntarily and enthusiastically remained with Leonidas when all the other allies left, not wanting to be surrounded and killed by the Persians. Perhaps the citizens of Thespieae were so actively involved in the fight against the Persians out of a desire to oppose themselves to Thebes, whose pro-Persian sentiments and actions were well known. The Thespieae always tried to take a position opposite to Thebes in foreign policy.

Rezumat. *Articolul analizează sursele istorice care menționează detașamentul format din șapte sute de hopliți din cetatea beotiană Thespieae, care, alături de cei trei sute de spartani, au participat la bătălia de la Termopile (480 BC.). Autoarea investighează motivele pentru care rolul thespienilor în această rezistență eroică împotriva perșilor a fost complet sau parțial trecut sub tăcere.*

Deja la Herodot, tradiția spartană domină în totalitate relatarea sa despre această bătălie. Concentrarea exclusivă asupra spartanilor se explică prin intenția ideologilor din Sparta de a glorifica fapta lui Leonidas și a detașamentului său, minimalizând contribuția thespienilor. Eforturile spartanilor nu au fost zadarnice, întrucât tradiția europeană a consacrat imaginea spartanilor drept unici eroi ai Termopilelor.

Articolul oferă și o posibilă explicație privind alegerea thespienilor de a rămâne alături de Leonidas. Este posibil ca cetățenii din Thespieae să fi acționat astfel din dorința de a se opune Tebei, cunoscută pentru atitudinea sa pro-persană. De altfel, Thespieae s-a poziționat constant în politica externă în opoziție față de Teba.

Keywords: Thespieae, Thespians, Sparta, Spartans, Thermopylae, Leonidas, Thebes, Plataea, Herodotus, Plutarch.

The purpose of this article is to study and analyze sources that mention or, on the contrary, conceal information about the detachment of Thespians who fought and died together with three hundred Spartans in the Battle of Thermopylae. A strong tradition has reached our time that the heroes of Thermopylae were three hundred Spartans led by the king of Sparta, Leonidas. However, the seven hundred Thespians who fought alongside the Spartans and who would seem to have earned the same glory are not mentioned very often in our tradition. If Herodotus said anything about them, the later authors Diodorus and Plutarch did not even do this, although they made significant changes and additions to their version of the history of Thermopylae that were absent from Herodotus. As a result, the general public,

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both in ancient times and in modern times, has developed a one-sided view of the true heroes of Thermopylae: so, any schoolchild knows about the feat of the Spartans at Thermopylae, but is unlikely to have ever heard of the Thespians. Let's try to understand the reasons for this phenomenon.

Of course, the history of Athens and Sparta, as the most significant Greek cities, is reflected to the greatest extent in the sources. The bulk of the narrative tradition concerns precisely these two states. Even about such important Greek cities as Corinth, Megara or Thebes, we know much less. This applies even more to the policies of the 'second' tier, such as Thespieae. The latter was one of the Boeotian cities, information about which is usually very fragmentary. It seems to us that it is all the more important to analyze both the narrative tradition and the relatively recent archaeological and epigraphic material that expands our knowledge of Thespieae and the Thespians.

From this point of view, a seemingly insignificant event – the participation of the Thespian detachment in the battle of Thermopylae – expands our knowledge in several respects. Thus, we begin to better understand how exactly the 'Spartan-centric' scale of spiritual values was formed not only within Sparta, but also outside of it. We expand our knowledge of the relations of Thebes, as the head of the Boeotian League, with the communities that comprised that League. We gain additional information about the peculiarities of the political orientation of those Boeotian cities that were in constant opposition to Thebes.

The most detailed account of the battle at Thermopylae between the allied Greek army and the Persians in 480² is found in Herodotus (VII. 201–233). The great attention that Herodotus paid to this episode of the Greco-Persian Wars shows that by the time he wrote his work, the legend of Thermopylae had already been created in its main features. Otherwise, Thermopylae would have been perceived as an insignificant episode in the Greeks' failed attempt to stop the Persians on the border between Northern and Central Greece. As an indisputable defeat of the Greek army, this episode would hardly have received much attention from Herodotus. But Herodotus not only described all the stages of the Battle of Thermopylae, he even named the most outstanding fighters by name (VII. 226–227) and quoted three funeral epitaphs of fallen soldiers (VII. 228). The depth of Herodotus' interest in this story is also evidenced by his statement that he knows the names of all three hundred Spartans who died in battle (VII. 224)³. The high assessment that Herodotus gives to King Leonidas⁴ as a military leader also causes some surprise. Herodotus speaks of him as 'the one most admired (ὁ δὲ θωμαζόμενος μάλιστα) the leader of the whole army' (VII. 204, hereinafter translated by A. D. Godley).

Such a high assessment of a commander who actually destroyed and himself and his entire detachment and ultimately allowed the Persians to enter Central Greece can only mean one thing: in the time of Herodotus the heroic death of Leonidas and the three hundred Spartans was already perceived by all of Greece as the highest manifestation of military valor

² All dates here and below are BC.

³ Herodotus apparently had access to specifically Spartan sources and was able to familiarize himself with the list of those killed in Sparta itself. Pausanias, seven centuries later, saw this stele in the center of the city with the names and patronymics of all the fallen Spartans (III. 14. 1).

⁴ Leonidas (c. 540–480) belonged to the royal family of the Agiads and was the son of Anaxandridas II (c. 560–c. 520). He succeeded his half-brother Cleomenes I on the throne between 491 and 488. At the beginning of his reign, he was about 50 years old. Almost nothing is known about his activities before Thermopylae. He owes his fame solely and only to Thermopylae (VANNICELLI 2017, 554–555).

ever recorded since the time of Homer. So, Herodotus' story about Thermopylae is, in fact, not just a presentation of the facts known to him, but his own version of the events that took place at Thermopylae. He presented them under the influence of the mythologized plot about the feat of three hundred Spartans led by Leonidas, which had already developed by his time.

By the middle of the 5th century, the idea that the Spartans would rather die than retreat had apparently already become firmly entrenched in the mass consciousness. It is no coincidence that the Greeks were in great amazement when they learned that the Spartan garrison on the island of Sphacteria had surrendered to the Athenians (425). Thucydides explains the reason for this astonishment as follows: '... men could not conceive that the Lacedaemonians would ever be induced by hunger or any other compulsion to give up their arms, but thought that they would keep them till they died, fighting as long as they were able...' (IV. 40. 1, hereinafter translated by Ch. F. Smith).

The Spartan authorities, apparently, very quickly appreciated the educational and propaganda potential of the feat of Leonidas and his detachment. They, not without the help of Delphi, worked hard to create a mythologized version of this Thermopylae episode. Official tradition insists that the Greeks' final resistance was solely the result of Leonidas' deliberate choice, and not of a random and poorly controlled objective course of events⁵. Herodotus makes this clear. Here is how he explains Leonidas' strange, from a military point of view, decision to release the allied contingents before the final battle with the Persians: the king, already aware of the inevitability of death, wanted '... to win distinction for the Spartans alone...' (...βουλόμενον κλέος καταθέσθαι μούνων Σπαρτιητέων...) (VII. 220. 4)⁶. All the more valuable for us is the testimony of Herodotus, where he mentions the Thespians along with the Spartans.

It is worth looking at how and in what context Herodotus mentions the Thespians. After all the allied contingents, as Herodotus claims, with the consent of Leonidas, left Thermopylae, only Leonidas remained in the camp with three hundred Spartans. A detachment of seven hundred Thespians joined them voluntarily and even enthusiastically (VII. 222)⁷. Unfortunately, Herodotus says not a word about the considerations that guided the Thespians in their decision to stay with Leonidas rather than leave with all the other allies. For a comparatively small town such as Thespieae, the dispatch of such a large contingent seems excessive. Their contribution to the common cause was more significant than that of such rich and populous cities as Corinth with its detachment of 400 men, or Tegea and Mantinea, which sent 500 men each (VII. 202). Even the Spartans sent only three hundred hoplites, although they claimed that this was only their avant-garde (VII. 206).

⁵ VANNICELLI 2017, 570–571.

⁶ In Herodotus, the word κλέος and its cognates are most often associated with the Spartans (V. 77. 1; VII. 220; IX. 48. 3; 78) (VANNICELLI 2017, 573; TUPLIN 2022, 315).

⁷ Not a single Boeotian city, except Thespieae and Thebes, sent its troops to the allied army. The Thespieae, apparently, sent almost their entire hoplite militia to Thermopylae. The area of Thespieae (447,358 km²) was about half the size of Thebes (907,612 km²). In Boeotia terms, Thespieae was a significant city. Nearby were four smaller settlements dependent on Thespieae. For Thespian *synteleia* see esp.: GONZALEZ 2006, 36–37. The wealth of the city and the desire of the Thespians to decorate it worthily are evidenced by the numerous statues of gods and heroes, executed by the best sculptors of Greece, such as Lysippus and Praxiteles (Paus. IX. 27. 3–4; Plin. NH. XXXVI. 22).

Leonidas also left a detachment of 400 Thebans in his camp⁸. The Spartan king probably feared betrayal by the Thebans, rightly suspecting them of *medism*⁹ (Her. VII. 205. 2–3). The Thebans sent their warriors to the allied army only under strong pressure from Leonidas: apparently, they did not want to openly admit that they were supporters of the Persians¹⁰. This is how Herodotus talks about it: After the departure of all the allied squads, ‘... the Thebans remained against their will and desire, for Leonidas kept them as hostages’ (VII. 222)¹¹. Most likely, Leonidas’ goal was to detain them in his camp to prevent them from joining the Persians. The Theban detachment did not take part in the final fatal battle. The Thebans surrendered, abandoning the Spartans and Thespians, as soon as they saw the detachment of Persian immortals in their rear (VII. 225. 2; 233).

Herodotus clearly contrasts the valor of the Thespians, who were determined to join Leonidas, with the reluctance of the Thebans to do the same: ‘The Thespians very gladly remained, saying they would not abandon Leonidas and those with him by leaving; instead, they would stay and die with them’ (... Θεσπιέες δὲ ἐκόντες μάλιστα, οἳ οὐκ ἔφασαν ἀπολιπόντες Λεωνίδην καὶ τοὺς μετ’ αὐτοῦ ἀπαλλάξεσθαι, ἀλλὰ καταμείναντες συναπέθανον) (VII. 222).

But in his account of the third and last day of the battle, Herodotus does not mention the Thespians. He speaks only of the Spartans (VII. 223). However, from the preceding and subsequent context it is clear that the Spartans did not put up the final heroic resistance to the Persian advance at Thermopylae alone, but together with the Thespians (Her. VII. 222; 226. 1)¹². They all died in the final clash with the Persians, but true glory went only to the Spartans. Already in Herodotus, who was probably strongly influenced by the pro-Spartan tradition¹³, preference is clearly given to the Spartans. He focuses his attention exclusively on them. This is partly, of course, explained by the fact that the allied troops were led by a Spartan – King Leonidas. However, it is already important that Herodotus considered it necessary to mention the Thespians at all: the historian, by speaking of the warriors who distinguished themselves most in the last battle, noted that they were from among the Lacedaemonians and Thespians (Λακεδαιμονίων δὲ καὶ Θεσπιέων τοιούτων γενομένων) (VII. 226. 1). In doing so, he voluntarily or involuntarily recognized their objective equality¹⁴. But Herodotus then clearly singles out the Spartans: among the most valiant warriors, he first names the Spartan Dieneces, who ‘is said to have exhibited the greatest courage of all’ (ἀνὴρ ἄριστος) (226.1), followed by Alpheus and Maron (227). It is curious that Herodotus interrupts his list of the bravest Spartan warriors by ‘wedge’ into it a laconic witticism attributed to Dieneces. With its help, the historian once again emphasizes the fearlessness and heroism of

⁸ Plutarch, a Boeotian patriot, tried to rehabilitate the Thebans and clear them of the charge of pro-Persian sympathies (Plut. *Mor.* 865 e = *De mal. Her.* 31). As for Herodotus, his commentators believe that the historian ‘has been misled by malignant Athenian gossip’ (HOW, WELLS 1912, 229: [VII. 222]).

⁹ A term usually restricted to states or individuals who voluntarily collaborated with the Persia during the Greco-Persian Wars.

¹⁰ HOW, WELLS 1912, 228–229.

¹¹ Ephorus offers a different version. He claims that ‘... the inhabitants of Thebes were divided against each other with respect to the alliance with the Persians’ (Diod. XI. 4. 7, hereinafter translated by C. H. Oldfather). Perhaps the ruling party, which supported the Persians, sent opponents of rapprochement with them to the front. This was one of the traditional ways of getting rid of the opposition (Her. III. 44. 2; Thuc. III. 75; Xen. *Hell.* III. 1. 4).

¹² The Persian marines who found themselves at the site of the battle at Thermopylae were convinced that all the fallen Greeks were Lacedaemonians and Thespians (Her. VIII. 25. 1–2).

¹³ LORAUX 1977, 113–114; PARADISO 2011, 529.

¹⁴ PARADISO 2011, 529.

the Spartans. And of the seven hundred Thespians, Herodotus found it necessary to single out only one warrior – Dithyrambus son of Harmatides (227). Unfortunately, this is all that Herodotus tells us about the Thespians who fought and died with the Spartans¹⁵. So, on the one hand, Herodotus mentions the merits of the Thespians, but, on the other hand, he focuses his main attention on the Spartans. In this regard, P. Vannicelli noted the following: 'Listing the best in battle, Herodotus therefore allows a gap to emerge between the content of his story (that tends to recognize equal valor on the parts of the Lacedaemonians and the Thespians) and the catalogue of the *aristoi*'.¹⁶

Later authors Diodorus (XI. 9. 2) and Pausanias (IX. 20. 2) say even less about the Thespians than Herodotus: only the fact of their presence in Leonidas' troop is voiced, without any value judgments. However, the Thespians are nevertheless mentioned.

Herodotus certainly acknowledged the valor of the Thespians. However, this recognition contrasts with the absence of any mention of the Thespians in the epitaphs that Herodotus saw fit to quote¹⁷. The historian cites the texts of three inscriptions placed on memorial steles in honor of those who died in the Battle of Thermopylae. He explains that two of these inscriptions are collective. They appeared by order of the Delphic *Amphictyony* and at its expense (VII. 228):¹⁸ the first epigram was dedicated to Sparta's Peloponnesian allies, and the second – to the Spartans themselves. The third epitaph was intended for the famous diviner Megistias, an Acarnanian, whom the Spartans invited into their service.¹⁹ This third epigram most likely did not appear by order of the Delphic *Amphictyōnes*, but solely due to the private initiative of Simonides, whose friend Megistias was. Simonides was also the author of this epitaph.

The first epigram speaks of fallen warriors only from the Peloponnese, although in the first days of the battle there were also hoplites from other regions of Greece among the dead. The second, most famous, mentions only the fallen Spartans (Her. VII. 228. 2). The third speaks of a soothsayer who was in the service of the Spartans. In this regard, A. Petrovic noted that 'it is hard to evade simultaneous feelings of admiration for Sparta' greatness in

¹⁵ It must be admitted that there is also little information about the Spartans. Herodotus describes the last battle quite schematically and briefly. Apparently, since there were no living participants in the battle on the Greek side, the source of fragmentary information about the course of the battle could have been those Greeks who fought on the side of the Persians. It is known, for example, that in the Battle of Plataea there were about 50 thousand of them (Her. IX. 32; Plut. *Arist.* 18. 7).

¹⁶ VANNICELLI 2007, 318.

¹⁷ ALLGAIER 2022, 80.

¹⁸ At the beginning of the Greco-Persian Wars, pro-Persian sentiments prevailed among the members of the Delphic *Amphictyony*, since most of its participants belonged to the communities of Northern and Central Greece. But after several victories won by the Greeks, the *Amphictyōnes* tried to rehabilitate themselves by becoming the initiators of a number of patriotic initiatives. On the Delphic *Amphictyony* see esp.: LEFEVRE 1998.

¹⁹ The Spartans attached great importance to all kinds of prophecies and often relied on them when making important decisions. On their campaigns they tried to take professional fortune tellers with them. They were, as a rule, famous priests and prophets, invited from other regions of Greece. During military operations, they helped Spartan commanders-in-chief perform all the necessary sacred manipulations. Such an invited priest was the Acarnanian Megistias from the line of hereditary soothsayers, descendants of Melampus (Her. VII. 221). After his death, the Spartans called upon another famous seer, Tisamenus from Elis. According to legend, with him they won five victories in the Greco-Persian Wars (Her. IX. 33–36; Paus. III. 11. 5–9; IV. 14. 13). Apparently, the Spartans have valued Tisamenus' contribution to their military successes so highly that they granted him and his brother civil rights. Herodotus claims that they were the only foreigners to receive such an award (IX. 33). Indeed, we know of no other examples of foreigners being granted Spartan citizenship in the Classical and Hellenistic periods, although in earlier times such cases may have occasionally occurred. On the particular religiousness of the Spartans and their tendency to superstition, see esp.: PARKER 1989, 142–172; FLOWER 2018, 425–452.

battle and chagrin at its pettiness in refusing to recognize the accomplishments of other *poleis* at Thermopylae in September 480 BC'.²⁰

Herodotus, having quoted three Thermopylae epitaphs, leaves us in the dark as to how many there were in all. Most likely, in his time there were already more than three of them. But it was precisely these three epigrams that seemed to Herodotus, apparently, especially worthy of perpetuation. Perhaps Herodotus liked the laconic severity of the Spartan epitaph. The choice of the inscription dedicated to Megistias is most likely explained by the fact that its author was the famous Athenian poet Simonides, whose talent Herodotus probably admired. But these are all assumptions. In fact, we will never know what considerations Herodotus actually had in choosing these three epitaphs. There could have been just an element of chance here.

We would assume that at least by the middle of the 5th century there was already a monument to the seven hundred fallen Thespians at Thermopylae. This is all the more likely since there is evidence to show how much importance the Thespians attached to perpetuating the memory of their heroes.²¹ It was most likely on their initiative and at their expense that the stele in honor of the fallen heroes of Thespieae was erected.²² But, be that as it may, Herodotus does not mention or quote any Thespian epitaph, thereby voluntarily or involuntarily allowing the tradition to focus exclusively on the Spartans and King Leonidas. In this regard, Pietro Vannicelli, perhaps too bluntly, noted that 'in fact, the epigrams offer a further example of that discrimination against the Thespians, to the advantage of the Spartans'.²³

We cannot, of course, say with certainty that among the tombstones at Thermopylae there was also a stele with an epitaph dedicated to the fallen Thespians. However, this assumption is quite probable and can be supported by one, albeit not direct, piece of evidence. Stephanus of Byzantium, in his ethno-geographical dictionary, in the article on Thespieae (Steph. Byz. s.v. Θέσπεια), cites an elegiac distich attributed to a certain Philiadas of Megara. It speaks precisely about the fallen Thespians:

ἄνδρες θ' οἳ ποτ' ἔναιον ὑπὸ κροτάφοις Ἑλικῶνος, |
 λήματι τῶν αὐχεῖ Θεσπιάς εὐρύχορος
 (Philiadas FGE 289–290)

'These people once lived on the upper slopes of Helicon;

²⁰ PETROVIC 2009, 57.

²¹ Thus, in Thespieae itself, a grandiose monument was erected in the form of a marble lion, towering over nine steles listing the one hundred and one names of Thespians who fell at Delium in 424 (IG VII 1888). This lion's monument, with which the Thespians immortalized the memory of their new demographic catastrophe, became a generally accepted symbol of veneration for the citizens of Thespieae who died in battle. (But stone lions were traditional funerary monuments used throughout Greece from the beginning of the Archaic period.). For this monument and the surviving fragments of inscriptions, see esp.: ROESCH 2009, 3–5. In Thespieae, during excavations, fragments of another collective burial monument were found with the names of fallen Thespians. As far as we can judge from the writing of some letters, it is more ancient than the monument dedicated to those killed at Delium (424). It is assumed that we could be talking about the battles either at Plataea (479), or at Oenophyta (457), or at Coronea (447) (ROESCH 2009, 1–2).

²² The usual practice, at least from the middle of the sixth century onwards, was to bury the dead either on the battlefields (Paus. IX. 2. 5) or in the territories of nearby friendly communities (Her. IX. 85; Xen. *Hell.* II. 4. 33). Thus, according to Herodotus, after the Battle of Plataea 'the Greeks... buried each contingent of their dead in a separate place' (IX. 85).

²³ VANNICELLI 2007, 319.

the vast Thespieae are proud of their courage' (transl. is ours. – L.P.)²⁴

Such an epigram could well have been on one of the five funerary steles that Strabo saw at the site of the battle (IX. 4. 2. P. 425)²⁵. It should be noted that Philiadès' epigram is similar in style and content to the epitaphs of the Greco-Persian Wars. But, of course, this is only an assumption that is not shared by everyone. Thus, the editor of Greek epigrams, Denys L. Page, believed that this epitaph was more of a later literary exercise than a genuine classical inscription²⁶. But we rather join the supporters of its authenticity. Thus, in a newly published study devoted to the perpetuation of the memory of Spartans who died in the war, Matthew A. Sears spoke out in favor of the authenticity of this epigram. In his opinion, it corresponds in form and content to the Spartan epitaphs of this period, which do not contain any pan-Greek propaganda clichés: there is not a word about defending the homeland or the struggle for the freedom of all Hellenes. Most of the epitaphs from this period are usually very laconic: they glorify the dead and the cities that sent them²⁷. Philiadès' epigram fully corresponds to this model.

The question arises as to why it was precisely the detachment of hoplites from Boeotian Thespieae that, as Herodotus asserts, voluntarily (ἐκόντες) remained with Leonidas (VII. 222). The few fragmentary pieces of information that have come down to us about Thespieae can to some extent help to understand this problem. Thespieae (Θεσπιαί), located 80 stadia west of Thebes, remained in opposition to Thebes throughout its history, negatively perceiving the latter's claims to hegemony in Boeotia. As a rule, Thespieae took a position in foreign policy opposite to that of Thebes. E. V. Rung quite correctly noted that the choice between patriotism and *medism* 'depended to a large extent... on traditional priorities in foreign policy, which effectively excluded the choice of one and the same side in the Greco-Persian conflict between warring Greek tribes and city-states. The old-time feud did not allow the Thebans and Thespians to come to a common consensus...' (transl. is ours. – L.P.)²⁸.

Thespieae, unlike Thebes and most of the Boeotian city, took the most active part in the Greco-Persian Wars on the side of the Hellenic League. Two cities, Thespieae and Plataea, were the only ones in Boeotia that in 481 refused to give the heralds of Xerxes 'earth and water' (Her. VII. 132. 2; VIII. 66. 2). It was not without reason that Xerxes burned only these two cities when he passed through Boeotia (VIII. 50). Although the Thespieae lost their entire hoplite militia at the battle of Thermopylae (VII. 225), already in the following year, 479, they sent almost two thousand of their lightly armed soldiers to Plataea (IX. 30). The enormous human losses suffered by Thespieae during the Persian Wars greatly weakened the city and significantly reduced the civilian population.

But in ancient tradition the merits of the Thespians were not always mentioned. This concerns in particular the participation of the Thespians in the Battle of Plataea. For example, they were named among the victors on the Serpent Column, placed in Delphi and located there until 324 AD (ML 27)²⁹. But their name was absent from the inscription on the base of

²⁴ This text is also quoted by Eustathius of Thessalonica in his *'Commentary on the Iliad'* where Thespieae are mentioned among other Boeotian cities (Il. II. 498). In this regard, he refers to the *'Ethnica'* of Stephanus as his source.

²⁵ BROWN 2013, 112.

²⁶ PAGE 1981, 78–79.

²⁷ SEARS 2023, 74.

²⁸ RUNG 2005, 24–25.

²⁹ Initially, a distich dedicated personally to the regent Pausanias, who stood at the head of the allied army, was carved here. After the allies were outraged by such injustice, the Spartan authorities, wishing to hush up the scandal,

the statue of Zeus, which 'was dedicated by those Greeks who at Plataea fought against the Persians under Mardonius' (Paus. V. 23. 1, hereinafter translated by W. H. S. Jones). Pausanias included only the Plataeans in his list of Boeotian victors (V. 23. 2). P. Vannicelli suggests that this 'list might be aligned with a string of traditions that obscure the Thespian presence in the Persian Wars'³⁰.

In its consistent anti-Persian policy, Thespieae, together with Plataea, invariably found itself in opposition to Thebes and other Boeotian cities. The latter were accused of *medism*³¹ and in the 80s and 70s, during the campaign against traitor cities, were often sentenced to various kinds of punishment, sometimes very severe (Her. IX. 86–88; Xen. *Hell.* VI. 3. 20; 5. 35; Polyb. IX. 39. 5; Justin. XI. 3. 10; cf.: Her. VII. 132). One of the forms of such punishments was monetary compensation, which had to be paid to the policies that suffered at the hands of the Persians by those Greek communities that collaborated with the Persians. The text of a court decision from Olympia (mid-470s) has been preserved (SEG 31. 358). It follows from this decree that the Boeotians had previously been condemned for their active pro-Persian position and fined. As for Thespieae, the Thessalians had to pay them monetary compensation, apparently because they, as part of Xerxes' army, took part in the capture and plunder of Thespieae³².

The Thespians, like the Spartans, were distinguished by their amazing warlike spirit, fortitude and desperate bravery. They always preferred to die rather than retreat. These qualities of theirs were especially clearly demonstrated during the Greco-Persian Wars. But exactly the same behavior was characteristic of them in the future. As a result, they continued to suffer enormous losses throughout the classical period. The Thespians lost so many citizens during numerous military campaigns that they were even forced to invite new colonists to their city and grant them civil rights (Her. VIII. 75. 1).

The struggle to maintain independence from Thebes, sometimes latent, sometimes open, was, it seems the main content of the history of Thespieae³³. Many of their actions and deeds were determined by the desire to oppose themselves to the Thebans and the rest of Boeotia, which was inclined to recognize the hegemony of Thebes.

Tradition usually unites Thespieae and Plataea in their opposition to Thebes. Thus, the citizens of Thespieae and Plataea were the only Boeotians who did not give 'earth and water' to the envoys of Xerxes (Her. VII. 132. 1). These cities, again the only ones of all the Boeotians sent their troops to Plataea in 479 (IX. 28. 6; 30).

The hostile relations between Thebes, which stood at the head of the Boeotian League, on the one hand, and Thespieae together with Plataea, on the other, have a long history. As early as 519 the Thebans led an attack on Plataea in an attempt to force the Plataeans to join their newly formed League (Her. VI. 108. 5). Their enmity intensified during any military crisis. Both cities disloyal to Thebes, in search of allies, turned for help either to Athens or to Sparta, depending on the balance of political forces³⁴.

ordered 'immediately to chiseled off these verses and inscribed on the tripod by name all the cities which had had a part in overthrowing the Barbarians and had together set up this offering' (Thuc. I. 132. 3).

³⁰ VANNICELLI 2007, 318.

³¹ Herodotus repeatedly notes the *medism* of the Thebans (VII. 206. 233; IX. 15. 40. 67. 86–88) and of the Boeotians in general (VIII. 34). On the phenomenon of *medism*, see esp.: RUNG 2005, 14–35.

³² BECK, GANTER 2015, 139–140.

³³ For the relations between Thespieae and Thebes during all periods of the existence of the Boeotian League, see esp.: ROESCH 1965.

³⁴ HORNBLOWER 2011, 107.

Apparently, the Thebans began to feel a particular hostility towards Thespieae and Plataea after the heroic behavior of these two communities during the Greco-Persian Wars. Their confrontation often led to tragic consequences for these two cities. Thus in 423 the Thebans destroyed the walls of Thespieae. Thucydides explains the reason for such an act as follows: 'In the same summer the Thebans dismantled the wall of the Thespians, accusing them of favoring the Athenians (ἀττικισμόν). Indeed, they had always wished to do this, but now found it easier, since the flower of the Thespians had perished in the battle with the Athenians' (IV. 133. 1). Thucydides clearly does not approve of the punitive action of Thebes.

The Thebans also showed exceptional cruelty towards disloyal Thespieae at the end of the 70s of the 4th c. After the Spartans left Boeotia in 375, Thespieae was forced to join the recently revived Boeotian League³⁵. According to Diodorus, as a measure of intimidation, at some point between 373 and 371³⁶ during the campaign against Plataea, 'the Thebans ... pillaged Thespieae as well, which was at odds with them' (... οἱ μὲν Θηβαῖοι... καὶ Θεσπιάς ἄλλοτρίως πρὸς αὐτοὺς διακειμένας ἐξεπόρθησαν) (Diod. XV. 46. 6)³⁷. The Thebans seem to have treated Thespieae less harshly than Plataea. The punishment did not include the complete destruction of the city and the expulsion of all its inhabitants, as was the case with Plataea (Diod. XV. 46. 4–6). This conclusion, however, is contradicted by the statement of Demosthenes that among the cities destroyed by the Thebans, besides Orchomenus and Plataea, were also Thespieae (Dem. XVI. 4). But it is worth noting that in the speeches of orators there are often inaccuracies and exaggerations, which is due to the peculiarities of this genre.

Thebes, by carrying out such punitive actions against Thespieae, thereby punished them for their pro-Spartan sentiments and actions. During the period of Sparta's hegemony, Thespieae, along with Plataea and Orchomenus, placed their bets on Sparta and became Sparta's strongholds in Boeotia. Spartan garrisons led by *harmosts*³⁸ appeared in Thespieae. For the Spartan king Agesilaus, Thespieae even became the main base in Boeotia (Polyaen. II. 1. 11). The king, in his two Boeotian campaigns of 378 and 377, used Thespieae as a base for attacking and devastating the environs of Thebes³⁹. Agesilaus even rebuilt or strengthened the city walls (Xen. *Hell.* V. 4. 41), and when he left the city, left there as *harmost* Phoebidas, one of his high officers. The Thespian hoplites apparently voluntarily and willingly joined the Spartan garrison (*Hell.* V. 4. 42–43).

The confrontation and hostility between Thespieae and Thebes were of a long-term nature. At critical moments, especially during the weakening of Thebes, this enmity burst out into the open. Perhaps the Thespians took such an active part in the struggle against the Persians

³⁵ Under the terms of the Peace of Antalcidas in 387/6, the Boeotian League was dissolved, and in 375/374 it was restored.

³⁶ The sources indicate this date differently. Thus, according to Pausanias (IX. 1. 8), the action against Plataea took place in the summer of 373. In that case, the attack on Thespieae took place at the same time.

³⁷ Since Diodorus' phrase is somewhat ambiguous, it has often been understood to mean that the Thebans treated Thespieae as cruelly as they did Plataea, completely destroying it. This is the opinion, for example, of M. A. Sears (SEARS 2023). According to K. Taplin, Thespieae as an urban center was destroyed, and the inhabitants were resettled in other communities (*dioecism*) (TUPLIN 1986, 321–341). We find more convincing the opinion of those scholars who believe that the city was not subjected to complete destruction, but was only captured by the Thebans, plundered and returned to the bosom of the Boeotian Confederacy (Xen. *Hell.* VI. 3. 1) (FIEHN 1936, 38; HORNBLLOWER 2011, 247).

³⁸ *Harmosts* are Spartan military governors who appeared during the Peloponnesian War. They were sent together with garrisons to the most important allied cities to exercise direct rule and provide forceful support to pro-Spartan regimes. The body of *harmosts* existed until the Battle of Leuctra (Xen. *Hell.* VI. 3. 18; Paus. IX. 6. 4).

³⁹ For Agesilaus' military campaigns in Boeotia, see: MUNN 1987, 106–138.

not so much out of patriotic considerations as out of a desire to oppose themselves to the Thebans, whose pro-Persian sentiments and actions were well known.

The feud between Thebes and Thespieae continued into the Hellenistic era. Thus, in 335, when the Thebans rebelled against Macedonia, the Thespians, Orchomenians and Plataeans took part in their suppression (Diod. XVII. 13. 5). Their actions were motivated by long-term grievances and a thirst for revenge⁴⁰. As a result, Alexander destroyed Thebes and enslaved most of the surviving population (Diod. XVII. 9–14; Arrian. *Anab.* I. 7–10; Plut. *Alex.* 11).

To sum up, we note that quite early, even before Herodotus, there was a tendency to highlight the heroism of only Leonidas' detachment, mentioning in passing or completely ignoring the role of the Thespians both in the Battle of Thermopylae and in the Greco-Persian Wars in general⁴¹. This was partly because the Greeks, quite naturally, viewed Sparta (along with Athens) as the undisputed political leaders, thanks to whose efforts the victory over the Persians had been achieved. The merits of these two cities were so great that they involuntarily overshadowed the contribution of other Greeks to the overall victory. As for Thermopylae specifically, the role of the Spartans in that battle seems to have been imagined by the Greeks to be more significant than it actually was. This is largely explained by the fact that the allied army was led by a Spartan – King Leonidas. He became a key figure at Thermopylae, a model of military valor and patriotism. Already in Herodotus' description of the last battle, traces of stylization in the spirit of Homer are visible, especially in the picture of the Spartans' struggle for the body of their king with its obvious epic coloring (VII. 225)⁴². It is not surprising that Herodotus, apparently in line with an already established legend, praised Leonidas' military talents extremely highly (VII. 204). The historian, apparently wanting to expand the Greeks' knowledge of Leonidas and to emphasize the antiquity and nobility of his origin, even provided a complete list of all his ancestors, right up to Heracles (VII. 204)⁴³. Greek genealogies like these, with so many ancestors (both mythical and historical), are rare⁴⁴.

The legend of Thermopylae, which has become one of the key elements of European and Western cultural tradition, was largely formed thanks to the efforts of the Spartan authorities. They were probably able to secure the support of both the Delphic Oracle and the famous priestly family of the Melampides⁴⁵, to which Megistias belonged. Certainly, both the Delphic priests⁴⁶ and the famous Greek soothsayers who collaborated with Sparta played a role in developing the official version of the death of Leonidas and his detachment. For the Spartans themselves, the legend of Thermopylae became the central event of their history

⁴⁰ BECK, GANTER 2015, 151.

⁴¹ LORAUX 1977, 113.

⁴² Researchers have repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that the fierce struggle for Leonidas' body is reminiscent of certain episodes from the Iliad, especially those that deal with the struggle around Patroclus' body (Il. XVII. 256–318) (VANNICELLI, CORCELLA 2017, 577–578; ZALI 2021, 238; TUPLIN 2022, 354–355, n.171).

⁴³ Leonidas was given posthumous honors that were unusual even for Spartan kings. He was the first to have a separate tombstone erected in the very center of the city (Plut. *Lyc.* 27. 1–2; Paus. III. 14. 1). The Spartans even instituted an annual festival in Leonidas' honor – *Leonideia* (Λεωνιδεία) (Paus. III. 14. 1).

⁴⁴ VANNICELLI, CORCELLA 2017, 555–556.

⁴⁵ For the Melampides, with reference to literature, see: VANNICELLI, CORCELLA 2017, 573.

⁴⁶ The Spartan kings had long-standing and very close ties with Delphi. There are a number of known cases where the Delphic priests helped individual kings to obtain the prophecies they needed. Sometimes, to please the kings, priests even decided to fabricate oracles (Her. VI. 66; Thuc. I. 134. 44; II. 21. 1; V. 16. 2–3; Plut. *Per.* 22–23; cf.: Diod. XI. 45. 8–9).

and an important element of the patriotic education of their own youth. And outside of Sparta, the feat of the three hundred Spartans began to be perceived as an unsurpassed example of heroism.

Herodotus contributed to this tradition, focusing mainly on the heroism and sacrifice of Leonidas and his 300 Spartans. The military defeat of the Spartans under the pen of Herodotus was transformed into the most striking demonstration of the moral superiority of the Spartans not only over the Persians, but also over the rest of the Greeks. In such a context, of course, the Thespians were not needed. They, despite their outstanding valor, failed, unlike the Spartans, to make their name an appellative word⁴⁷. I think it is no great exaggeration to say that Herodotus' account of the Battle of Thermopylae is dominated by the Spartan tradition. One of the many Boeotian cities, Thespieae found itself in the shadow of the great Sparta. This is psychologically understandable. For example, the Athenians often forgot about the help of the Plataeans in order to attribute the glory of Marathon to themselves alone (Her. IX. 27. 5; Thuc. I. 73. 4; Lys. *Epitaph*. 23–24)⁴⁸. Apparently, Athenian orators repeated this false assertion about the Plataeans so often that it became a propaganda *cliché*. And others did the same. Thus, Thucydides conveys the words of the Plataeans, addressed to the Spartans in 427, that in the battle of Plataea (479) they were the only Boeotians who fought (III. 54. 3). That is, the Plataeans also quite deliberately forgot to mention the Thespians.

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⁴⁷ The Thespians, for example, are not even mentioned in Zack Snyder's famous film '300 Spartans'.

⁴⁸ LORAUX 1977, 114.

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