# DIVINE INTERVENTION AND THE UNITY OF THE GREEKS DURING THE PERSIAN INVASION

*By J.Z. van Rookhuijzen*

**Summary:** Herodotus' *Histories* shows that the Persian invasion of Greece of 480-479 BCE revealed divisions among Greek city-states. Despite these divisions, this article argues that the work also relates how Greek gods and heroes remained united in repelling the Persians, providing a lesson to Herodotus' Panhellenic audience. To this end, the paper examines the sacred topography related to divine interventions in four narratives in the *Histories*: the Sepias shipwreck, the Persian siege of Delphi, the burning of the Athenian Acropolis' olive tree, and the battle of Plataiai. Through an analysis of these narratives and their topography, the article explores how the *Histories* emphasizes the unified force of Greek divinities in the conflict.

The topic of this paper is the topography of the Persian invasion of Greece under Xerxes in 480-479 BCE. The land campaign in that invasion (though not the Persian Wars as a whole) ended with the battle of Plataiai, whose anniversary of 2,500 years was celebrated in 2022, the year of the conference that inspired the present volume.[1] As is well known, the Persian invasion exposed the fault lines in the unison of the Greek city states. The peoples of many northern areas, including Thessaly, Delphi, and Thebes medized, succumbing to the Persian demand for earth and water (Hdt. 7.133). Those in the south, including the Athenians and the Spartans, sometimes stood united, but later discourse (as found in

1 I am grateful to Kostas Buraselis for his idea to organize a conference in the year of the 2500th anniversary of the battle of Plataiai and his hospitality at Delphi, and to Antonis Kaponis for reading an earlier version of this contribution. The present article revisits some of the places and themes that have been part of my doctoral work, published as Van Rookhuijzen 2017a; 2017b; 2018. Greek citations follow Wilson 2015. All translations are mine. This research was made possible in part through a research grant awarded by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung.

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Herodotus' text itself, e.g., 7.139, 8.93, and 9.85 and in later texts, e.g, Plutarch's *On the Malice of Herodotus*) included much discussion on the merits of each *polis'* individual contribution to the defeat of the Persians. Even if the unison of the Greek states was at stake throughout the period of the independent city-states, in this paper I attempt to show that the Greek gods and heroes – a hallmark of the relatedness of all Greek people – had stood united in repelling the Persians in this greatest of wars from Greek lands and seas.[2] In this context, the finding that Herodotus wrote for a Panhellenic audience is relevant,[3] as is Herodotus' own comment on 'Greekness' (8.144): beside language and kinship, the shared religion was perceived as a characteristic of the Greeks. The thesis of the present essay is that reflections of the unifying force of the Greek divinities appear in the topography that is part of Herodotus' account, our only full account of the wars. To this end, following some methodological considerations on ancient topography, I discuss the sacred topography of several prominent narratives of divine intervention during the Persian Wars in Greece, related to the shipwreck at Sepias, the Persian siege of Delphi, the burning of the olive tree at the Athenian Acropolis, and the battle of Plataiai.

## 1. Methodological considerations

Even if the topography of the Persian Wars has many sources, Herodotus' *Histories* has become to posterity its main account, owing to the great detail it offers and its production date about a generation after the event, in the heyday of the Athenian empire and on the eve of new, dangerous tensions between the Athenians and Spartans. The Persian invasion now represented the period of yesteryear in which many Greeks had stood united against their common enemy.

The topographical study of the Persian Wars has traditionally and understandably been a purely historical endeavor. It started early and –

2 On divine intervention in the Persian Wars generally, see Pritchett 1979a: 11-46; Jacquemin 2000; Mikalson 2003; Rawlings 2007: 179-80.

3 On the Panhellenic objectives of Herodotus' work, see, e.g., Jacoby 1913: 409-10; Stadter 2006: 253-54. Yates 2019, however, argues against Panhellenic overtones.

perhaps unsurprisingly – some notable scholars on this topic, such as William Leake (1777-1860) and Kendrick Pritchett (1909-2007), were themselves military men.[4] Even so, the reconstruction of the Persian Wars was difficult because there were very few surviving landmarks that could be employed, and none of these landmarks could with absolute certainty be identified with places described by Herodotus. Thus, the great puzzle of the whereabouts of the Persian Wars unfolded – and perhaps precisely because it was a puzzle, the topography of the wars became all the more alluring. The puzzle also had ideological aspects: for even if it was difficult and large parts were missing, attempts to solve it were worthwhile, as in these battles, western civilization and its boons were saved from history's dustbin by the successful Greek repelling of eastern tyranny. These were wars not only to commemorate, but also to learn from.

In this scholarship informed by the quest for historical truth, there has sometimes existed a tendency to take ancient battle topographies as unproblematic material to spatially reconstruct ancient wars.[5] The topography of Greece has frequently been taken at face value or even as the most reliable information to be gleaned from ancient texts. After all, even if the armies were long gone, the Greek landscape itself still existed, allowing posterity to verify Herodotus' narrative – a gold mine for clues that would grant direct insight into how and where the battle had proceeded. If the wars taught historical lessons, the battlefields were the best schools. Yet, we may question now: Was that approach valid? A sense that Herodotus is no infallible guide to the Persian Wars has always existed.[6] However, as the typical justification went, veterans of the wars were in the days of Herodotus still alive to correct him. Thus, on the whole, Herodotus' account, even with all its embellishments, still provided an accurate reflection of the war – and certainly of the topography.

However, since the mid-twentieth century, studies have appeared in which places of memory are recognized and explored as cultural phenomena that help to create collective identities. In a pioneering book from 1941, *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Sainte*, Maurice

4 See, e.g., Leake 1821; Pritchett 1957; 1993.
5 A testimony of this approach is Müller 1987; 1997.
6 Earlier critical approaches include Delbrück 1887; Whatley 1964.

Halbwachs attempted to discover to what 'laws' the places where events took place obey. Halbwachs stressed the 'sacred' character of these places by calling them *lieux saints* ("sacred places").[7] However, the concept is much broader than the religious sphere. Places of memory are sometimes called *lieux de mémoire*, a term which has, however, paradoxically been employed not only in a topographical sense, but also to describe widely divergent concepts such as national symbols and holidays. A more specific and arguably more useful term for a place of memory can be *mnemotope*, used by Jan Assmann to describe physical places where people may receive real or (pseudo-)historical experiences.[8] Mnemotopes can be man-made structures and natural landmarks, and even empty spaces – but always specific and confined.

The concentration of multiple mnemotopes in a particular area can be called a *memory landscape*, a term that adheres to complex topographies, such as battle sites. Complex historical events can be narrated through mnemotopes in the landscape. These narrations can be at odds with historical 'reality'. An enlightening study regarding battle sites and narratives is by Maoz Azaryahu & Kenneth Foote (2008), who have argued that topographical narratives are simplified into a collection of particular anecdotes, and often enhanced using pre-existing dominant buildings and landmarks. This distorts the historical battle as "time or space is shortened, concatenated, compressed, lengthened, embellished, straightened, or smoothed".[9]

If the narrative power of memory landscapes is recognized, it is a reasonable expectation that Herodotus' text can be explored along these lines as well.[10] In recent years, scholars have started to look at Herodotus' topography of Xerxes' invasion from a memory perspective. In this scholarship, it is recognized that by the time the *Histories* were published, in the second half of the fifth century BCE, so much time had already elapsed since Xerxes' invasion that a process of commemoration had started. In that process, the topography of the war may have been radi-

7 Halbwachs 1941.
8 Assmann 1992: 59-60.
9 Azaryahu & Foote 2008: 187.
10 Van Rookhuijzen 2018.

cally transformed in the recollections of Herodotus' informants. This period has been the focus of Giorgia Proietti's important work on the formation of memories about the Persian Wars.[11] Meanwhile, philologists have brought to the fore the narratological patterns in the *Histories*, showcasing the extent to which this work can be regarded as a literary product rather than a direct testimony of events.[12]

Neither memory studies nor narratology explicitly undermine the essential historicity of Herodotus' account: the Persian Wars were important and real, and perhaps archaeological evidence for the conflict is still lurking in the fields and at the bottom of the sea. Nevertheless, the application of memory studies, in which later reflections and experiences are highlighted, and narratological insights, which reveal the underlying patterns in the stories, are at the possible expense of pure historical reconstruction (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). While the quest for historical confirmation of the historicity of the wars will go on and can have good credentials, new readings and vantage points for this topography can no longer be ignored. This leads to new questions: Why do specific places feature in Herodotus' topography in the first place? What stories were remembered at these places – and why?

In the remainder of this paper, these questions are asked from four places appearing in Herodotus' account of the Persian Wars. They have been selected as examples of sites where divine intervention is an important feature of Herodotus' narrative, in a sense bringing us back to Halbwachs' *lieux saints*.[13] They foreground the potential of memory analyses of the topography, especially as the belief in the action of the gods and heroes likely needs to be assigned to *post eventum* memory-making. Scholars have typically regarded the instances of divine intervention as ahistorical embellishments to otherwise essentially historical events; in other words: when studying the wars, the divine intervention can simply be ignored, and what is left is a historical narrative that comes close to an accurate testimony of *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. This may sometimes be correct; but in line with the findings of Azaryahu & Foote, we have to

11 Proietti 2021.

12 De Jong 2014. De Jong is currently preparing a narratological commentary on Herodotus.

13 On divine intervention in the Persian Wars, see, e.g., Jacquemin 2000; Mikalson 2003.

remain open to the possibility that the belief in divine intervention shaped Herodotus' account itself and that the mnemotopes of such stories have given rise to the topography in that account. If so, what is the function of these stories of divine intervention? It is my surmise that they can show that the Greek gods and heroes had taken action to protect the territorial integrity of Hellas as a whole, and thus set an example for the cooperation of the various Greek states to repel the Persians.

## 2. Thetis, the Nereids, and Boreas at Sepias

The coast of Sepias appears in Herodotus' account at the moment when the enormous Persian fleet turns south from Therme (at modern Thessaloniki) on its way to Athens. Here, on the coast of Thessaly, an area that was largely obedient to the Persian king, the Persians were surprised by a vicious storm, which destroyed many ships. Herodotus details the position of the fleet and the arrival of the storm as follows (7.188):

> Ὁ δὲ δὴ ναυτικὸς στρατὸς ἐπείτε ὁρμηθεὶς ἔπλεε καὶ κατέσχε τῆς Μαγνησίης χώρης ἐς τὸν αἰγιαλὸν τὸν μεταξὺ Κασθαναίης τε πόλιος ἐόντα καὶ Σηπιάδος ἀκτῆς, [...] ἅμα δὲ ὄρθρῳ ἐξ αἰθρίης τε καὶ νηνεμίης τῆς θαλάσσης ζεσάσης ἐπέπεσέ σφι χειμών τε μέγας καὶ πολλὸς ἄνεμος ἀπηλιώτης, τὸν δὴ Ἑλλησποντίην καλέουσι οἱ περὶ ταῦτα τὰ χωρία οἰκημένοι. [...] ὅσας δὲ τῶν νεῶν μεταρσίας ἔλαβε, τὰς μὲν ἐξέφερε πρὸς Ἴπνους καλεομένους τοὺς ἐν Πηλίῳ, τὰς δὲ ἐς τὸν αἰγιαλόν· αἱ δὲ περὶ αὐτὴν τὴν Σηπιάδα περιέπιπτον, αἱ δὲ ἐς Μελίβοιαν πόλιν, αἱ δὲ ἐς Κασθαναίην ἐξεβράσσοντο. ἦν τε τοῦ χειμῶνος χρῆμα ἀφόρητον.
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> So when the fleet, having set out, sailed and put into the land of Magnesia at the beach which is between the city of Kasthanaia and the coast of Sepias [...] at dawn, from clear and windless weather, the sea became wild and a strong and mighty wind from the east, which the people who live there call 'Hellespontian', surprised them ... Those ships that [the wind] caught at sea, it carried off; some it brought to the so-called Ovens in Mount Pelion, others to the beach; some

> wrecked near Sepias itself, others at the city of Meliboia, yet others were cast to Kasthanaia. The force of the storm was unbearable.

Then the Persians try to counteract the storm as follows (7.191):

> ἡμέρας γὰρ δὴ ἐχείμαζε τρεῖς· τέλος δὲ ἔντομά τε ποιεῦντες καὶ καταείδοντες γοῆσι οἱ Μάγοι τῷ ἀνέμῳ, πρός τε τούτοισι καὶ τῇ Θέτι καὶ τῇσι Νηρηίσι θύοντες ἔπαυσαν τετάρτῃ ἡμέρῃ, ἢ ἄλλως κως αὐτὸς ἐθέλων ἐκόπασε. τῇ δὲ Θέτι ἔθυον πυθόμενοι παρὰ τῶν Ἰώνων τὸν λόγον ὡς ἐκ τοῦ χώρου τούτου ἁρπασθείη ὑπὸ Πηλέος, εἴη τε ἅπασα ἡ ἀκτὴ ἡ Σηπιὰς ἐκείνης τε καὶ τῶν ἀλλέων Νηρηίδων.
>
> The storm lasted for three days, but finally the Magi, by sacrificing to the wind and singing chants to appease it, and moreover offering to Thetis and the Nereids, stopped it on the fourth day, or perhaps [the storm] stopped because of its own will. They offered to Thetis after hearing from the Ionians the story that she was abducted from that place by Peleus, and that the entire coast of Sepias belonged to her and the other Nereids.

This Persian shipwreck happened along the steep and rather dangerous coast of Mount Pelion, near the town of Kasthanaia, which was probably located at modern Keramidi. The so-called 'Ovens' are the eighteen large sea caves near the village of Veneto. Called for their semi-circular shape that resembles a traditional Greek oven, they are a truly impressive feature of the coastline.

Scholars have tried to locate the coast of Sepias on the basis of Herodotus' chronological indications in the narrative and assumptions about ancient sailing speeds. Accordingly, Sepias has been identified with the cape of Agios Giorgios, or with the more northern cape Pouri (or Pori), both part of the Pelion peninsula.[14] However, as I have argued elsewhere, chronological indications and assumed sailing speeds are not necessarily a reliable guide to the topography of ancient texts. It is an eminent possibility that Sepias was located much closer to the other places mentioned by Herodotus and that it was the name of the coast with the Ovens

14 Pritchett 1963: 3-4; Müller 1987: 361-63; Morton 2001: 73 n. 8.

itself. This identification of Sepias seems to be a better match for the topographical situation because it is closer to Kasthanaia and there is also an inscription mentioning the town of Sepias found at Keramidi.[15]

The Ovens of Veneto are the most striking natural feature of the coast. It is possible that they were the mnemotope for the myth of the abduction of Thetis by Peleus, not only because caves often have stories attached to them, but also because the association with Thetis is consistent with the widespread ancient idea that sea nymphs lived in sea caves.[16] Even though Herodotus does not explicitly associate Sepias or Thetis with caves, Euripides does so in his *Andromache* (1263-69), where Thetis' abode is described as a hollow chamber in 'the rock of Sepias'. In other words, the Ovens can be considered part of the coast called Sepias and they were the mnemotope for myths and folklore, as well as for the story of the Persian shipwreck. This does not necessarily imply that the shipwreck is a fiction. Nevertheless, we have to recognize that the idea of natural disasters destroying parts of the Persian land army or fleet is common in the *Histories*.[17] It seems, furthermore, significant that the storm at Sepias is foreshadowed in an anecdote at the Hellespont (7.49), where Artabanos, Xerxes' trusted advisor, warns about the dangers of following the Greek coast where safe harbors are few and far between.

Whether the shipwreck at Sepias is a historical reality or not, it was certainly important in later thinking of the Persian Wars, for the storm was thought to have diminished the size of the Persian armada and thus to have contributed to the decisive Greek victory at Salamis. The divine intervention in the passage cited above should be understood in this context of commemoration. The Persian Magi are said to have tried to appease Thetis, the Nereids and the wind in order to calm down the sea. Their plea was temporarily successful. However, it proved to be in vain, as soon after, during the battle of Artemision, another storm followed, which caused the sinking of two hundred Persian ships at Euboea (8.13). Even if Herodotus, in a rationalizing mode, leaves open the option that

15 Inscription: *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology (Liverpool)* 3 (1910) 159, 13. See also van Rookhuijzen 2017b.

16 E.g., Hom. *Il.* 18.50, 18.402, 24.82.

17 Cambyses' army was lost in a sandstorm in the Libyan desert (Hdt. 3.26) and other storms killed Persians at Athos (Hdt. 6.44) and Mount Ida (7.42).

the storm ceased by itself, the point of the story is that Thetis, the Nereids and the wind may have chosen to protect Greece. Thetis in particular would have conjured up the Homeric image of her frequent help to Achilles, and thereby the Greeks, in the Trojan War – that other Panhellenic exploit which for Classical Greeks may have been considered a prefiguration of the Persian Wars.[18]

Herodotus may have been skeptical himself, but the story was part of the lore surrounding the cultic invocation of wind gods, namely Boreas (the North Wind) and the Athenian princess Oreïthyia (the 'Lady of Mountain Storms'). Herodotus (7.189) writes that the sanctuary of Boreas at the Ilissos river in Athens was founded to thank this god for his help in decreasing the Persian forces at the very spot where he had kidnapped Oreïthyia (Pl. *Phdr*. 229c-d). As Herodotus makes clear, the Delphians were involved as well, after their god Apollo had ordered them to sacrifice to the winds (7.178):

> Οἱ μὲν δὴ Ἕλληνες κατὰ τάχος ἐβοήθεον διαταχθέντες, Δελφοὶ δ' ἐν τούτῳ τῷ χρόνῳ ἐχρηστηριάζοντο τῷ θεῷ ὑπὲρ ἑωυτῶν καὶ τῆς Ἑλλάδος καταρρωδηκότες, καί σφι ἐχρήσθη ἀνέμοισι εὔχεσθαι· μεγάλους γὰρ τούτους ἔσεσθαι τῇ Ἑλλάδι συμμάχους. Δελφοὶ δὲ δεξάμενοι τὸ μαντήιον πρῶτα μὲν Ἑλλήνων τοῖσι βουλομένοισι εἶναι ἐλευθέροισι ἐξήγγειλαν τὰ χρησθέντα αὐτοῖσι, καί σφι δεινῶς καταρρωδέουσι τὸν βάρβαρον ἐξαγγείλαντες χάριν ἀθάνατον κατέθεντο· μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα οἱ Δελφοὶ τοῖσι ἀνέμοισι βωμόν τε ἀπέδεξαν ἐν Θυίῃ, τῇ περ τῆς Κηφισοῦ θυγατρὸς Θυίης τὸ τέμενός ἐστι, ἐπ' ἧς καὶ ὁ χῶρος οὗτος τὴν ἐπωνυμίην ἔχει, καὶ θυσίῃσί σφεας καὶ ὁ χῶρος οὗτος τὴν ἐπωνυμίην ἔχει, καὶ θυσίῃσί σφεας μετήισαν.

> The Greeks hastily came to aid, arranging themselves for battle, but the Delphians meanwhile consulted the oracle of the god, fearing for themselves and for Greece. And the oracle told them to pray to the winds, for these would prove great allies for Greece. And the Delphians, having received the oracle, first announced what was professed to them to the Greeks who wanted to be free, and after they professed it to them, who greatly feared the Persians, they professed an undying

18 See, e.g., Ferrari 2000 (on the north metopes of the Parthenon).

> gratitude. After this the Delphians founded an altar for the winds in Thyia, where the sacred precinct of Thyia, the daughter of the Kephisos is, by which also the place is named, and they offered sacrifices to them.

The Delphic cults can fit in a wider role of the sanctuary as a major Panhellenic site of commemoration of the Persian Wars with such monuments as the Treasury of the Athenians, thought to commemorate the battle of Marathon, and the Serpent Column which commemorated the battle of Plataiai.[19]

The story about the Persian shipwreck with its mnemotope at the Ovens and its commemoration at the sanctuaries at the Ilissos and at Thyia, is meaningful because it emphasizes the role of Boreas, Thetis and the Nereids as divinities capable of upsetting and calming down the sea. The Magi's effort to appease these essentially Greek divinities does not work, but only results in more devastation, similar to the Persian appeasement of Athena in Troy (7.43). Here in Thessaly, the Persians were combatted not by the local, medizing people, but rather by Greek gods who did not accept appeasement by those who had trespassed. In the episode about the Delphic cult of the winds, it is clear that the winds were believed to have acted in the defense of Hellas as a whole, rather than favoring any particular Greek *polis* or tribe.

## 3. Apollo, Phylakos, and Autonoös at Delphi

According to Herodotus, the sanctuary of Delphi itself, too, had been the scene of a battle during Xerxes' invasion. During the march of the army from Thermopylae to Athens, the sacred city had been besieged by a special contingent of the Persian army. But the siege was unsuccessful (8.37-38):

> ἐπεὶ δὲ ἀγχοῦ τε ἦσαν οἱ βάρβαροι ἐπιόντες καὶ ἀπώρων τὸ ἱρόν, ἐν τούτῳ ὁ προφήτης, τῷ οὔνομα ἦν Ἀκήρατος, ὁρᾷ πρὸ τοῦ νηοῦ ὅπλα προκείμενα ἔσωθεν ἐκ τοῦ μεγάρου ἐξενηνειγμένα ἱρά, τῶν οὐκ ὅσιον

19 Jacquemin 2011.

ἦν ἅπτεσθαι ἀνθρώπων οὐδενί. [...] ἐπεὶ γὰρ δὴ ἦσαν ἐπιόντες οἱ βάρβαροι κατὰ τὸ ἱρὸν τῆς Προνηίης Ἀθηναίης, ἐν τούτῳ ἐκ μὲν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κεραυνοὶ αὐτοῖσι ἐνέπιπτον, ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ Παρνησσοῦ ἀπορραγεῖσαι δύο κορυφαὶ ἐφέροντο πολλῷ πατάγῳ ἐς αὐτοὺς καὶ κατέλαβον συχνούς σφεων, ἐκ δὲ τοῦ ἱροῦ τῆς Προνηίης βοή τε καὶ ἀλαλαγμὸς ἐγίνετο. συμμιγέντων δὲ τούτων πάντων φόβος τοῖσι βαρβάροισι ἐνεπεπτώκεε. μαθόντες δὲ οἱ Δελφοὶ φεύγοντάς σφεας, ἐπικαταβάντες ἀπέκτειναν πλῆθός τι αὐτῶν. οἱ δὲ περιεόντες ἰθὺ Βοιωτῶν ἔφευγον. ἔλεγον δὲ οἱ ἀπονοστήσαντες οὗτοι τῶν βαρβάρων, ὡς ἐγὼ πυνθάνομαι, ὡς πρὸς τούτοισι καὶ ἄλλα ὥρων θεῖα· δύο γὰρ ὁπλίτας μέζονα ἢ κατὰ ἄνθρωπον φύσιν ἔχοντας ἕπεσθαί σφι κτείνοντας καὶ διώκοντας.

When the Persians had approached the temple and could see it, the seer Akeratos found that the sacred weapons, which no mortal was ever allowed to touch, had been taken from the interior of the temple and now lay in front of it. [...] When the Persians had gone up the road to the sanctuary of Athena Pronaia, lightning descended upon them, and from the Parnassos two mountain peaks crashed upon them. As a result, many perished. And from the sanctuary of Athena a chilling scream resounded. This caused the Persians to panic, and when the Delphians realized that they were fleeing, they went after them and killed a large number of them. The survivors immediately fled to Boeotia. The Persians who returned said (as I myself was told) that they saw other divine signs besides what I have just described: for two hoplites, larger than a mortal in stature, had come after them to kill and pursue them.

Herodotus subsequently describes the place where this happened (8.39):

τούτους δὲ τοὺς δύο Δελφοὶ λέγουσι εἶναι ἐπιχωρίους ἥρωας, Φύλακόν τε καὶ Αὐτόνοον, τῶν τὰ τεμένεά ἐστι περὶ τὸ ἱρόν, Φυλάκου μὲν παρ' αὐτὴν τὴν ὁδὸν κατύπερθε τοῦ ἱροῦ τῆς Προνηίης, Αὐτονόου δὲ πέλας τῆς Κασταλίης ὑπὸ τῇ Ὑαμπείῃ κορυφῇ. οἱ δὲ πεσόντες ἀπὸ τοῦ Παρνησσοῦ λίθοι ἔτι καὶ ἐς ἡμέας ἦσαν σόοι, ἐν τῷ τεμένεϊ τῆς Προνηίης Ἀθηναίης κείμενοι, ἐς τὸ ἐνέσκηψαν διὰ τῶν βαρβάρων

> φερόμενοι. τούτων μέν νυν τῶν ἀνδρῶν αὕτη ἀπὸ τοῦ ἱροῦ ἀπαλλαγὴ γίνεται.
>
> The Delphians say that these two [who appeared to be fighting the Persians] are local heroes, Phylakos and Autonoös. Their sanctuaries are near the temple, that of Phylakos by the road itself, above the temple of Pronaia, and that of Autonoös close to the Kastalian spring, under the mountain Hyampeia. The rocks which fell from the Parnassos were still preserved in my day, lying in the temenos of Athena Pronaia, where they fell into after dashing through the barbarians. These men then withdrew from the sanctuary.

The failed siege of Delphi is the only large episode in Herodotus' narrative of the Persian Wars that is generally thought to be unhistorical as a whole.[20] It has been felt that Herodotus tries to apologize the Delphians for their alleged role during the Persian Wars that Delphi had chosen the side of the Persians. If so, the story of the siege (perhaps like the story about Thyia, discussed above), may have served to restore the reputation of the oracle, by showing that the Delphians and their gods had not welcomed the Persians at all, but rather repelled them.

Whether Delphi was ever really besieged by the Persians is today not falsifiable. Yet, the story had a concrete topography. Herodotus refers primarily to the smaller sanctuary of Athena Pronaia, situated southeast of the sanctuary of Apollo, and speaks of the hero shrines of Phylakos and Autonoös as well as rocks that killed some of the Persians. These were apparently the mnemotopes of the siege story. The shrines of Phylakos and Autonoös have been identified with the two small (reportedly sixth-century BCE) structures on the eastern terrace of the sanctuary of Athena Pronaia.[21] However, this location does not match Herodotus' directions. Instead, Autonoös' shrine is described as being close to the Kastalian spring, further up the road to the sanctuary of Apollo. Architectural remains here have been associated with this temple, but the identification remains uncertain. Herodotus describes the shrine of Phylakos as by the road, above the temple of Athena Pronaia. It has been surmised

20 E.g. Asheri *et al.* 2010: 235-36; Hartmann 2010: 541.

21 Bousquet 1960: 191-92.

that the shrine was immediately northwest of the Athena Pronaia terrain. But others have suggested that the shrine of Phylakos is the famous tholos near the temple of Athena Pronaia.[22] However, the topography of the Athena Pronaia sanctuary relies on a description of the area by Pausanias (10.8.6-7) which is notoriously difficult to reconcile with the architectural remains on site. The exact location of the rocks that fell from the Parnassos is now unclear, but that they were there, should not be doubted: landslides are frequent here, and dangerous. A rock fell down from Parnassos in 1905 in bad weather and destroyed the restoration efforts of the French excavators and for a long time lay in the sanctuary.[23] It provided a dramatic illustration of what Herodotus may have encountered during his visit.

Although the rocks were used by Herodotus as proof that the Delphian story was true, they may in fact have formed the very inspiration for the story. Supporters of the historicity of Herodotus have argued that the story was essentially true once stripped of its supernatural element. For example, Nicholas Hammond in 1988 still remarked: "[c]omplete sceptics have to account for the arrival of the great rocks".[24] However, I would instead argue that such remarkable features of the sanctuary landscape could easily attract anecdotes to them and become mnemotopes, especially when they could subsequently function as evidence that the Persian army had reached Delphi. The rocks helped visitors to Delphi to visualize the siege and they thus became a testimony of divine power.

A similar kind of divine intervention at Delphi is also found in a later story: that of the siege of the Celts (279-278 BCE). Interestingly, that siege was remembered along similar lines as that of the Persians. In Pausanias' account of this attack (1.4.4; 10.23), thunder and rocks help to push back the Celts, as do ghostly appearances of hoplites, among whom Phylakos. Divine involvement also appears in Diodorus Siculus (22.9.5) and Cicero (*Div.* 1.37), who say that Athena Pronaia and Artemis (the so-called White Virgins) were fated, according to a Pythian oracle, to defend the sanctuary from the Celts. The Celtic siege was remembered in the Delphic *Soteria* ("Rescue") festival. The same basic story of divine intervention

22 Widdra 1965: 41; Settis 1967-1968. On the tholos generally, see Kyriakidis 2010.

23 Keramopoulos 1935: 92.

24 Hammond 1988: 565 n. 84.

could, apparently, be applied to different historical events. Every time, Apollo's sacred valley was ultimately saved by divine power.

The story also fitted the location of the temenos of Athena Pronaia: here, Athena, a guardian goddess par excellence, was aptly called Pronaia ("Before-the-temple"), because at this point, invaders were on the threshold of the treasure-rich sanctuary of Apollo. It was a logical religious practice to worship guardian deities, such as Phylakos ("Guardian") and Autonoös ("Self-thinking"), precisely here. Logically stories showing that such worship could be reciprocated would sooner or later arise. Rocks, which occasionally fell down from the Parnassos into the sacred temple precinct, could be inserted into the narratives about intervention that crystallized here.

Thus, despite the doubtful reputation of the Delphians, the local landscape of this Panhellenic location helped to forge a story of divine intervention repelling the Persians. It seems to have functioned as a terrestrial counterpart to the story about the Delphic prayers to the wind gods, and, even if this is not explicit in Herodotus' text, it could have functioned as a partial explanation for the loss of Persian soldiers and thus of the ultimate Greek victory at the battle of Plataiai.

## 4. Athena at Athens

After the episode at Delphi, the Persian army advanced to Athens, the principal city of Greece and the main objective of their invasion (7.8). Herodotus tells of the complete destruction of the Acropolis after a heroic Greek defense (8.53-55). The Greek defenders were all murdered and the temples of the gods went up in flames, as did Athena's sacred olive tree at the Erechtheion. However, following the destruction, Xerxes soon repented and ordered the Athenians in his army to sacrifice to the gods of the citadel. They saw that the burned tree had miraculously sprouted again (8.55):

> ἔστι ἐν τῇ ἀκροπόλι ταύτῃ Ἐρεχθέος τοῦ γηγενέος λεγομένου εἶναι νηός, ἐν τῷ ἐλαίη τε καὶ θάλασσα ἔνι, τὰ λόγος παρὰ Ἀθηναίων Ποσειδέωνά τε καὶ Ἀθηναίην ἐρίσαντας περὶ τῆς χώρης μαρτύρια θέσθαι. ταύτην ὦν τὴν ἐλαίην ἅμα τῷ ἄλλῳ ἱρῷ κατέλαβε

> ἐμπρησθῆναι ὑπὸ τῶν βαρβάρων· δευτέρῃ δὲ ἡμέρῃ ἀπὸ τῆς ἐμπρήσιος Ἀθηναίων οἱ θύειν ὑπὸ βασιλέος κελευόμενοι ὡς ἀνέβησαν ἐς τὸ ἱρόν, ὥρων βλαστὸν ἐκ τοῦ στελέχεος ὅσον τε πηχυαῖον ἀναδεδραμηκότα.
>
> There is on that Acropolis a temple of Erechtheus called the 'Earth-born', where there are an olive tree and a sea inside. According to the Athenian story, Poseidon and Athena, who were quarreling over the land, placed there as their testimonies. So that olive tree was set to fire along with the rest of the sanctuary by the Persians. On the second day after the fire, the Athenians ordered by the king to sacrifice went up to the sanctuary and saw a shoot sprung from the trunk, about a cubit long.

To Herodotus' audience, the incident exemplified Xerxes' recklessness and misunderstanding of Greek religion. The legend about the olive tree is also referred to by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. Rom.* 14.2.1-2) and Pausanias (1.27.2), who heard the story when he visited the Acropolis in the second century AD. The olive tree was apparently still alive and continued to function as a mnemotope of the Persian siege. The 'sea' of Poseidon was also still there. The Persians had not managed to dispossess the Athenians of their hallowed earth and water, and the ancient testimonies survived.

The story was not only connected to the theme of Persian barbarity and impiety and Xerxes' recklessness, but possibly had a deeper religious meaning, for the olive tree was a totem of the power of the goddess Athena and thus a measure of the condition of her city. Gloria Ferrari aptly describes the symbolism of the olive tree.[25] She compares the olive tree parable with another story in Herodotus about the Athenian politician Miltiades, who had been captured by the inhabitants of Lampsacus on the Hellespont (6.37). Croesus threatened, if they did not release Miltiades, to exterminate the city and its inhabitants like a pine tree, the only tree that does not regrow when cut down. But the olive tree, which stays green, provides useful oil, reaches a great age and can also rise from the dead, symbolized vitality and hope in dark days.

25 Ferrari 2002: 28-31.

The symbolism of the olive tree matched that of the Acropolis as a whole. If Herodotus visited the citadel in the 430s, the great temple that we know today as the Parthenon, with its imagery of mythical battles proclaiming Athenian hegemony over barbarism, already stood here as a symbol of the city's resurrection. In the center of the western pediment of this temple the sacred olive tree was depicted, flanked by a warring Athena and Poseidon. Herodotus himself does not point to this architecture, but nearby he did see a wall blackened by Persian fire (5.77). Not far from it, in the middle of the Acropolis, the ruins of an older sanctuary, the so-called Dörpfeld Temple, were presumably still visible. Through these mnemotopes, the story of Persian calamity was tangible. The juxtaposition of ancient blackened remains alongside new marble architecture made the Acropolis a multi-temporal site of remembrance, where the glorious present was literally framed within the disastrous past.

As at Sepias, the point of the story was not just the divine salvation, but also that it had been spurred by the dishonest intention of Xerxes and the medizing Athenians in his army. The story seems to imply that, by arranging an offering to the gods, Xerxes, without knowing it, secured the return of Athena as patron of the city of Athens, thus sealing the fate of his own expedition; his half-hearted appeasement of the gods did not help the Persian cause at all. Herodotus makes clear that the fate of the Acropolis was of concern to all the Greeks (8.56). Thus, while many gods of the Acropolis were autochthonous Athenians, their working had benefited the Greeks as a whole – and this may be part of the enduring appeal of the olive tree, especially to the Athenians as they claimed the hegemony of all the Greeks.

## 5. Demeter at Plataiai

The final relevant case of divine intervention is the battle of Plataiai, which took place in the plain between Thebes and Mount Kithairon, the last confrontation in mainland Greece between the collective Hellenes and the Persians. Herodotus' account of this complex battle reveals the extent to which the plain had become a memory landscape *par excellence*. An interesting case of divine intervention appears in the climax of the

fighting. After much turmoil, the Spartans and Tegeans halted at a temple of Demeter of Eleusis (9.57). Here, as they were being besieged by the Persian army, the Greeks performed sacrifices. Then Pausanias turned to the distant temple of Hera at Plataiai to invoke the goddess, after which positive omens started to appear. The temple of Demeter was the place where most of the fighting took place and the Persian general Mardonios was killed (9.62). Although this final stage of the fight had taken place near the temple, Herodotus notes a strange phenomenon (9.65):

> θῶμα δέ μοι ὅκως παρὰ τῆς Δήμητρος τὸ ἄλσος μαχομένων οὐδὲ εἷς ἐφάνη τῶν Περσέων οὔτε ἐσελθὼν ἐς τὸ τέμενος οὔτε ἐναποθανών, περί τε τὸ ἱρὸν οἱ πλεῖστοι ἐν τῷ βεβήλῳ ἔπεσον. δοκέω δέ, εἴ τι περὶ τῶν θείων πρηγμάτων δοκέειν δεῖ, ἡ θεὸς αὐτή σφεας οὐκ ἐδέκετο ἐμπρήσαντας {τὸ ἱρὸν} τὸ ἐν Ἐλευσῖνι ἀνάκτορον.
>
> It is a marvel to me that no-one of the Persians who fought near the sacred grove of Demeter appeared to have entered the sanctuary or died within it; most fell around the temple on profane ground. But I think, if one may think anything about divine affairs, that the goddess herself did not allow inside those who had put fire to her holy palace in Eleusis.

The location of the temple of Demeter is uncertain. According to Herodotus, it was situated at ten stades from the Gargaphie fountain, another landmark of the battlefield. Perhaps the most convincing location for the temple is a site to the west of the ridge of the chapel of Pantanassa east of the town of Erythres (Kriekouki), near a well, where temple remains were reported and two inscriptions mentioning Demeter were found.[26] The identification of the temple with this site has, however, been challenged and an important alternative is the hill of the church of Agios Dimitrios further north.[27]

Wherever the temple was, the idea that the location marked the climax of the battle has to be a simplification: the fighting with even a fraction of the gathered forces can only have taken place in a much larger

26 *IG* VII 1670 and 1671. Pritchett 1979b; Boedeker 2007: 68.

27 E.g., Hignett 1963: 433; Gilula 2003: 75-76.

area. Nevertheless, in this narrative, the battle is condensed into a single mnemotope and no sense of the actual area of the fighting is given. It has been proposed that one of the *tropaia* (trophies) of the battle of Plataiai, mentioned by Plato (*Menex.* 245a) and Pausanias (9.2.6), was set up at the temple of Demeter.[28] If this is true, it shows that the temple retained its status as the preeminent mnemotope of the battle, the place of the decisive τροπή ("turn"), because trophies were thought to mark these locations. However, though this is an eminent possibility, the ancient sources give no proof that the trophy was set up at the temple of Demeter. Nevertheless, Herodotus' story about Demeter's anger shows that a mythification process had enveloped the temple in the post-war period and that it had become an important mnemotope of the battle. This instance of divine intervention of Demeter is found in various other sources, including in Simonides' Plataiai elegy (fr. 17 W2, l. 1), showing that the story was more widely known, even if this poem is not necessarily independent of Herodotus.

A striking topographical correspondence is the relation of the battle of Plataiai to that of Mykale, allegedly fought on the same day and involving both Athenians and Spartans. As at Plataiai, at Mykale there was a Demeter temple where the main part of the fighting took place. It is possible that the localization of the battle was 'drawn' to the temple in post-war traditions, to facilitate notions about divine intervention and vengeance. Herodotus informs us that good news from Plataiai reached the Greeks on the other side of the Aegean on the same day by a divine message (9.100-101): the Athenians discovered a *kerykeion*, a herald's staff, on the beach, as if Hermes or Iris had brought the news from Plataiai. The correspondence also reveals the territoriality of the gods as defenders of the Greek land.

The topographical correspondence between Plataiai and Mykale can emphasize the territoriality of the gods as defenders of the collective Greek lands. While it should not be doubted that there was a temple of Demeter somewhere in the plain of Plataiai that had developed into the mnemotope for this story, Deborah Boedeker has observed that narra-

28 Hignett 1963: 432.

tive traditions surrounding this goddess appear in all major Greek victories during the Persian Wars.[29] It is possible that Demeter temples were included in post-war memory making to foster the sense of territorial integrity of Greece. To Boedeker's analysis may be added Herodotus' story (8.65) that before the battle of Salamis a giant dust cloud was seen rising near Eleusis. The cloud crossed the water and descended upon the Greeks at Salamis, as if the protecting power of Demeter descended upon them. A Pythian oracle in 7.141 uttered to the Athenians also connected Demeter in an ambiguous way to Xerxes' invasion, saying that the Persians will die ἤ που σκιδναμένης Δημήτερος ἢ συνιούσης ("when Demeter is scattered or collected"). Demeter can stand here for the harvest, but also for the goddess herself. I would suggest that Demeter was so often associated with battle sites because of her primary qualities as a wrathful force, a true 'Mother Earth' who was a guardian of Hellas as whole.[30]

## 6. Conclusion

This brief exposé has argued that the study of the topography of the Persian Wars as found in the work of Herodotus is not always or exclusively concerned with finding the location of historical events in the wars. It also concerns the retrieval of locations of stories that *inspired credence* for such events. I have focused on stories of divine intervention taking place at sanctuaries and other sites of cultic importance. It is impossible to know in every instance whether we owe these stories to Herodotus himself as the author of the *Histories*, and/or to his local informants; but what matters is that these stories functioned in a context in which they were generally believable. The stories are not mere embellishments that can be removed from the account to retrieve a historically authentic core, as has sometimes been contended; rather, they are at the very heart of the

29 Boedeker 2007.

30 Simões Rodrigues 2020. The local perspective of the divine forces of Plataiai (not only Demeter, but also Hera and possibly the hero Androkrates) is also apparent in Thucydides (2.71), where the Plataians, much later in 429, in a speech to the Spartans dwell upon the importance of local gods and heroes who govern the land of Plataiai as protectors of justice, and therefore of the outcome of local battles and of Plataiai's independence. As a response, the Spartans even directly invoke these gods.

remembrance of the wars and they have shaped Herodotus' narrative and topography of the Persian Wars, the only detailed account of the event that we have received from the classical tradition. The Greeks of Herodotus' age, though politically divided, shared a strong sense of unity that extended beyond their individual cities or regions. Their identity as Hellenes was based on their communal language, customs, and religion (Hdt. 8.144). While the gods and heroes were often locally worshipped, their main aim in the Persian Wars appears to be the same throughout Greece: to repel invaders from Greece at large. The gods were thus seen as the best *symmachoi* for the Greeks who longed for freedom. The surrender to the Persians was symbolized by the giving of earth and water. Some Greeks had been swayed by the Persian demand. However, the Greek gods and heroes provided a powerful counter-example, showing that mortal Greeks should never yield to those intent on conquering their earth and water.

And that same earth and water, punctuated with its mnemotopes of the wars, played a particularly important role in mediating and shaping this collective memory. Herodotus' account codified some of these beliefs and transmitted them to posterity. It promoted the creation of a Panhellenic identity, at a time when new fault lines in that identity were appearing and when the brief moment of resistance in unison against the Persians was the past's most powerful lesson.

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