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THOUGHTS ON THE RELIABILITY OF CLASSICAL  
WRITERS, WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO  
THE SIZE OF THE ARMY OF XERXES<sup>1</sup>

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No field has furnished the needy searcher for theme of dissertation or original production a more certain harvest than the denial of the reliability of some classical writer or the genuineness of some commonly accepted masterpiece. Has the world regarded Demosthenes as a model of unselfish patriotism? Then show that he was the shallow demagogue who brought to nought the liberal and far-sighted policies of an Aeschines. Has the world regarded Cicero as the frustrator of the criminal ambitions of a Catiline? Then show that Catiline was the large-minded reformer and Cicero the cheap and paid trimmer, the tool of entrenched privilege. Nothing is sacred, nothing exempt, everything must go into the furnace, and the greater glory if it is found that the most highly esteemed treasure is after all the greatest sham. With a shout of triumph near the close of his *Homerische Untersuchungen* Wilamowitz used these words: "Homer is now a might, but a vanquished might" ("Homer ist eine Macht, aber eine überwundene"). There is no need to weep beside the bier of fallen greatness; the only regret is that Homer had deceived the world so long.

Herodotus devoted years of patient research and traveled far that he might preserve "for the sake of posterity the remembrance of what men have done, and might prevent the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their meed of glory." The fact that he was willing to give honor to the Barbarians as well as to the Greeks might incline one to feel a certain affection for him, but he merits no such esteem, and the critics of our day discuss the Persian War, its numbers and its issues, and ignore the plainest statements of Herodotus, as if there had

<sup>1</sup>Read at the annual meeting of the Classical Association at Nashville, April 2, 1915.

never been a father of history. However, we need not weep for him, since he was lucky to escape so long.

Thucydides for centuries was regarded as the ideal historian, fair, informed, the despair of ancient and modern rivals or imitators, but Müller-Strübing has shown that the history is so improbable that much of it could not have come from Thucydides at all, but must have been put together by dull and incompetent pupils, and that the sieges in Thucydides are rather didactic exercises in strategy than the account of actual warfare.

Cornford has written a book with the highly suggestive title *Thucydides Mythistoricus*. In this book Cornford tries to prove that Thucydides had no grasp on the true causes or issues of the Peloponnesian War, and that his history is largely a piece of imaginative writing based on the poetic models of Aeschylus; also that the various characters therein are moral and ethical forces impersonated. Thucydides was not attempting to write sober history and he could not have succeeded if he had, for he had no adequate conception of the issues involved in that struggle. The friends of Thucydides need not shed their tears for him, but count him lucky to have deceived the world so long.

One of the things so difficult for the layman or amateur to grasp is the reason for the fact that the ordinary workman of Greece labored with such painful accuracy and such high regard for truth that Grecian temples and Grecian columns have for all these centuries withstood the assaults of time, earthquake, and barbarian, so that many of them are still erect (the centuries have not disclosed a single wilful or ignorant lie in the Parthenon), while Greece's great intellectual and literary leaders were at the same time both ignorantly and intentionally mendacious.

However gladly one would go round and pass by all questions of veracity and genuineness, the thing is impossible. The first problem in any writer must be to deal with these. If one discusses the three Greek words *μῦθος*, *λόγος*, *ἔπος*, at once the question arises whether or not *λόγος* is a Homeric word, since the two verses in which it is found in Homer have been rejected by many critics.

If he aims to treat the various words for "necessity," he must at once face the fact that many scholars remove the word *δεῖ* from

Homer. If the use of metals is his theme, he soon finds that every verse carrying a reference to the use of iron in Homer has been condemned, or if he studies the development of armor he must decide whether verses referring to the breastplate are to be regarded as interpolations or original. Many critics have removed from Homer all references to temples, images, the ten years' war, the choice of Paris, the number of the Muses, and even the knowledge of the Fates. How can anyone treat these problems in a competent manner, yet ignore the doubts cast on the authenticity of the very passages on which his problem is based? How different our conception of the Persian War if we regard Herodotus as competent, or as incompetent! The weight to be given to the sober statements of Thucydides depends entirely on the reliability of that historian. If Müller-Strübing and Cornford are correct, then the study of Thucydides is not a matter of historical appreciation but of literary and imaginative enjoyment.

Many of the criticisms and objections are purely subjective and matters of personal sentiment or feelings, and to such there can be no final answer, but some are in regard to matters of topography, geography, or archaeology, fields in which hidden truths are constantly coming to light. In nearly every case these hidden truths, when found, have answered the denials of skepticism and shown the honesty and competency of the classical writers.

Passing by the discoveries which prove the essential accuracy of Homer's description of the site and importance of Troy, the authenticity of the Trojan *Catalogue*, the early knowledge of the Sicels and Southern Italy, I shall limit myself to a discussion of Herodotus and his reliability at his most vulnerable point, namely the size of the army of Xerxes. However staggering the number given by Herodotus might once have seemed, we now regard the hosts of Xerxes with less surprise when we read that Russia has lost by the first of April 2,000,000 men and still has 7,000,000 men in the field.

In no part of the writings of Herodotus are his statements and conclusions regarded with less esteem. Herodotus tells how, after this host had crossed into Europe, 10,000 men were crowded into a compact place, then a wall was built around this space and the

men were counted by filling this inclosure 170 times; accordingly by assuming that the same numbers were crowded therein each time, that is 10,000 men, we reach the total number of infantry as 1,700,000. This is, of course, only a rough estimate and the leaders may have tickled the pride of the king and his zeal for great numbers by counting the inclosure full many times when it was not, or by counting some men twice, so that there would be no discrepancy with Herodotus to increase this number or to diminish it by a few hundred thousand. To the ships he assigns a definite number, then he assumes a rough estimate of added forces from the conquered regions, from the cavalry, the camel- and chariot-drivers, so that he puts the total fighting force at a little over 2,500,000. He assumes an equal number of camp-followers, sutlers, and members of the commissariat, so that he arrives at a total of roughly 5,000,000. These numbers have seemed so out of all reason that most modern writers have ignored them in estimating the size of the army and have reached their own conclusions from what seemed the necessities of the case. Delbrück estimates the number of the infantry at 45,000 to 55,000; Beloch thinks there may have been as many as 100,000; Meyer also thinks 100,000 is the highest possible number of infantry. Herodotus could not have been thus deceived, he must have known better and intended to propagate an untruth, since he was born under the Persian rule before the battle of Salamis and must have had friends who had been members of the Persian as well as of the Greek army, and he had traveled as widely in Persia as in Greece. He knew what the Persians thought of the size of their army as well as what the Greeks thought. Later writers might have exaggerated the numbers, because they had no means of knowing, but Herodotus knew the estimate of contemporaries from both sides. We can put the effective Persian army at 1,000,000 and acquit him of falsehood, but when we bring it down to 50,000 or 100,000 we can have no further use for the authority of Herodotus.

He is not the only false witness in this matter, since Aeschylus plainly vouches for the same numbers. Aeschylus is in every sense a competent witness, he and his family had done their share at Marathon and Salamis, he was over forty years of age when Xerxes

invaded Greece, and soon thereafter he wrote a play for an audience which also knew from experience something of the size of the Persian army. As far as the number of the ships is concerned, the figure given by him is the same as that given by Herodotus, and he too represents the Persian Empire as drained to its utmost in furnishing men for the huge army of Xerxes, using such sentences as these: "All the strength of Asia is gone"; "Nothing now remains in Persia save aged men and women"; "Susa is empty of its men"; "All the people of Persia on foot and on horse is gone like a swarm of bees"; "The Persian wife is left alone"; "Depopulated Asia mourns." This is exaggerated even for 5,000,000, but it is a screaming farce, if the number is less than 100,000. Aeschylus, a participant in the actual fighting, seems to have the same general estimate of the numbers of the Persians as that given by Herodotus.

An inscription, supposed to have been composed by Simonides, was set up by the Amphyctions at Thermopylae to honor the fallen, which inscription puts the number of Persians coming by land at 3,000,000. Whether the inscription be the composition of Simonides or not, it was put up when the facts were still fresh in the minds of all and must have reflected the opinion of that age. If the numbers were only a fiftieth or a thirtieth as great, then this is not exaggeration but insipid nonsense, a disgrace for the men who had fallen, a scandal to the survivors. No man was more eager than Herodotus to prick Greek pride or to show their borrowings from foreigners or the lateness of their supposedly ancient institutions, yet he never exposed their ignorance or imposture in this matter; not only did he not expose it, but he made it his own and connected therewith his name and his reputation.

None in any age were better qualified to speak in this matter than Aeschylus, Simonides, and Herodotus, and they all seem to tell the same story.

The two following generations were hard on the power and the resources of Persia; she not only lost her hold on the more remote provinces, but suffered severely from internal dissensions. The Persia of Xerxes declined much before Cyrus and Artaxerxes contended for the throne. We have an exact and competent estimate of the size of the Persian armies at the end of the fifth century.

Xenophon was a trained soldier who knew how to estimate distances and numbers. All that he says has the mark of a man who knew the facts and had the ability to use them.

When Cyrus decided to contest with his brother for the rule of Persia he made his mobilization by stealth, so that he could attack his unprepared adversary. In this he was fairly successful so that he reached the Euphrates before even the troops in his own army knew his purpose. Everything in this campaign reflects the unpreparedness of the king as the main point in the strategy, not only in the thought of Cyrus but later in the plans of the Greeks.

The theme of the *Anabasis* is the greatness of the Persian forces when assembled, and their present unpreparedness. What was the number of the Persians under these conditions?

The Persians with Cyrus numbered 120,000 infantry, 6,000 cavalry, and 200 scythe-bearing chariots, or about 130,000 fighting men. Of the Greeks there were 10,400 hoplites and 2,500 peltasts. The force under Cyrus was thus close to 150,000 effective fighting men. Here is a force of this size made up from a part of the soldiers who happened to be in Asia Minor. They were only a part of the Persian forces there stationed, since Tissaphernes and his army were not of them.

This army caught the king almost unawares and so accordingly he had but little time to gather his forces. However, at Cunaxa, although the Persians fought in solid squares with deep ranks while the army of Cyrus was well extended in order to present a long front to the enemy, yet the center of the Persians was well beyond the extreme left of Cyrus. Xenophon says that the Persian army then consisted of four divisions each of 300,000 men; one division arrived too late for the battle, so that there were only 900,000 men under Artaxerxes in the actual engagement. All the details of space and arrangement show that Xenophon has given a reliable account of the battle at Cunaxa. When we add to this number the Persians with Cyrus and those forces which arrived after the battle, we can hardly put the army of Persians ready for immediate service at much less than 1,500,000. What might have been the numbers if years had been spent in the muster!

However improbable, even if we accept the account of Herodotus, the exploits of the Greeks at Marathon, Salamis, and Platea may appear, they seem not more wonderful than the deeds of the Greeks at Cunaxa, and their safe return from the encompassing host of the Persians, and that too after they have lost their leaders.

Something happened to the Persians in the first quarter of the fifth century which broke their aggressive spirit. In the last part of the preceding century they had subdued Lydia, Babylonia, Egypt, Asia Minor to the Aegean, and had penetrated far into Europe. Xerxes himself was the son of Darius, his mother the daughter of Cyrus, and thus came of the most warlike blood. Yet something happened which crushed his spirit and the spirit of Persia and made them yield much of their western conquests. What could that have been but some overwhelming defeat, just such a defeat as came to them at Salamis and Platea?

Five nations now at war, France, England, Russia, Austria, and Germany, have each a larger army in the field or ready for service than the numbers given by Herodotus. Indeed we are told that already Russia, France, and Germany have each lost a larger army than the army of Xerxes, yet no one of them is crushed.

Beloch estimates the population of the Persian Empire in the fifth century at between 80,000,000 and 100,000,000—that is, a greater population than that of any nation now at war, except Russia. Take the lowest estimate, or 80,000,000, and Persia could easily furnish an army of 8,000,000. Herodotus tells us that for several years they were gathering supplies and putting them in convenient stations along the way, and that the commissary department had spent years in preparing for the march. In modern warfare ammunition is the great problem rather than men. General French has just said, “The army with the most ammunition will win.” It takes more men to keep the army supplied with ammunition and equipment than can be kept in the field. In ancient times each soldier brought his own shield, sword, bow, or spear, so that the question of ammunition never arose, and so accordingly a far larger proportion of the population could be under arms than in France or Germany. This army of Xerxes was intended to be a parade, a display of might, the very size of which would compel submission.



How large an army under these conditions could a warlike people of 80,000,000 muster? A loss of 40,000, or the army of the critics, would never have created a ripple and could never have changed the Persian Empire from an aggressive to a defensive nation. Beloch estimates the population of Greece at 3,000,000 or 4,000,000, while all the Greeks including those in Asia and the islands he puts at 7,000,000 or 8,000,000. All these were potential enemies, and all had at hand arms and equipment. Xerxes had little reason to trust his Greek subjects in Asia, so that his army must be ready and able to overawe a population of over 7,000,000. Does an army of 2,500,000 men seem a large number to be raised in four or five years from a warlike people of 80,000,000?

Herodotus could not have been so ignorant of the approximate numbers as to confuse 2,500,000 with 50,000 or 100,000, since he knew what the Persians themselves thought of the number. Artemisia, the heroine of Salamis, was from his own native Halicarnassus, and he was almost as proud of her and her exploits as he was of the Greeks. No doubt he knew her, at least by sight, and her version of the campaign of Xerxes might well have been the first he learned. Where is this Halicarnassian and Persian estimate of the size of Xerxes' army if not in the pages of Herodotus? Ctesias contributes little or nothing to the story. We may acquit others of falsehood on the ground of their ignorance, but we can make no such a plea for Herodotus. If his numbers are radically wrong, he was not mistaken; he simply lied, for he knew better.

The numbers given by him are not intended to be exact, they are only an approximation, so that we can raise the fighting force to 3,000,000 or lower to 1,000,000 and yet agree with him. When we consider the present armies now fighting in Europe, what estimate must we make of the size of an army sent by a warlike nation of 80,000,000 in order to make the supreme display and the supreme struggle, and an army of such size that its destruction changed the current of that nation's history?

For us to assume in the face of all this that Xerxes had an army only a fourth as large as that of poor little Servia is to make skepticism ridiculous, however solemn and pompous that skepticism may be.