

## **On Greek and Persian Power**

**from the seventh book of Histories**

**by Herodotus, written ca 440 BCE**

**Translated by George Rawlinson**

*Demaratus is a former Spartan (Greek) king now living in exile at the court of the Persian king, Xerxes. Xerxes is preparing to invade Greece with his massive Persian force and calls Demaratus to him. Xerxes interrogates him, wanting to learn more about his enemies. This account was written several decades after the fact, so it may not reflect exactly what transpired. But it does reflect Greek attitudes and historical memory of the events. Lacedaemonians is another word for the Spartans.*

Now after Xerxes had sailed down the whole line [reviewed his army and fleet] and was gone ashore, he sent for Demaratus the son of Ariston, who had accompanied him in his march upon Greece, and bespake him thus:- "Demaratus, it is my pleasure at this time to ask thee certain things which I wish to know. Thou art a Greek, and, as I hear from the other Greeks with whom I converse, no less than from thine own lips, thou art a native of a city which is not the meanest or the weakest in their land. Tell me, therefore, what thinkest thou? Will the Greeks lift a hand against us? Mine own judgment is, that even if all the Greeks and all the barbarians of the West were gathered together in one place, they would not be able to abide my onset, not being really of one mind. But I would fain know what thou thinkest hereon."

Thus Xerxes questioned; and the other replied in his turn,- "O king! is it thy will that I give thee a true answer, or dost thou wish for a pleasant one?" Then the king bade him speak the plain truth, and promised that he would not on that account hold him in less favour than heretofore.

So Demaratus, when he heard the promise, spake as follows:- "O king! since thou biddest me at all risks speak the truth, and not say what will one day prove me to have lied to thee, thus I answer. Want has at all times been a fellow-dweller with us in our land, while Valour is an ally whom we have gained by dint of wisdom and strict laws. Her aid enables us to drive out want and escape thralldom. Brave are all the Greeks who dwell in any Dorian land; but what I am about to say does not concern all, but only the Lacedaemonians. First then, come what may, they will never accept thy terms, which would reduce Greece to slavery; and further, they are sure to join battle with thee, though all the rest of the Greeks should submit to thy will. As for their numbers, do not ask how many they are, that their resistance should be a possible thing; for if a thousand of them should take the field, they will meet thee in battle, and so will any number, be it less than this, or be it more."

When Xerxes heard this answer of Demaratus, he laughed and answered:- "What wild words, Demaratus! A thousand men join battle with such an army as this! Come then, wilt thou- who wert once, as thou sayest, their king- engage to fight this very day with ten men? I trow not. And yet, if all thy fellow-citizens be indeed such as thou sayest they are, thou oughtest, as their king, by thine own country's usages, to be ready to fight with twice the number. If then each one of them be a match for ten of my soldiers, I may well call upon thee to be a match for twenty. So wouldest thou assure the truth of what thou hast now said. If, however, you Greeks, who vaunt yourselves so much, are of a truth men like those whom I have seen about my court, as thyself, Demaratus, and the others with whom I am wont to converse- if, I say, you are really men of this sort and size, how is the speech that thou hast uttered more than a mere empty boast? For, to go to the very verge of likelihood- how could a thousand men, or ten thousand, or even fifty thousand, particularly if they were all alike free,

and not under one lord- how could such a force, I say, stand against an army like mine? Let them be five thousand, and we shall have more than a thousand men to each one of theirs. If, indeed, like our troops, they had a single master, their fear of him might make them courageous beyond their natural bent; or they might be urged by lashes against an enemy which far outnumbered them. But left to their own free choice, assuredly they will act differently. For mine own part, I believe, that if the Greeks had to contend with the Persians only, and the numbers were equal on both sides, the Greeks would find it hard to stand their ground. We too have among us such men as those of whom thou spakest- not many indeed, but still we possess a few. For instance, some of my bodyguard would be willing to engage singly with three Greeks. But this thou didst not know; and therefore it was thou talkedst so foolishly."

Demaratus answered him- "I knew, O king! at the outset, that if I told thee the truth, my speech would displease thine ears. But as thou didst require me to answer thee with all possible truthfulness, I informed thee what the Spartans will do. And in this I spake not from any love that I bear them- for none knows better than thou what my love towards them is likely to be at the present time, when they have robbed me of my rank and my ancestral honours, and made me a homeless exile, whom thy father did receive, bestowing on me both shelter and sustenance. What likelihood is there that a man of understanding should be unthankful for kindness shown him, and not cherish it in his heart? For mine own self, I pretend not to cope with ten men, nor with two- nay, had I the choice, I would rather not fight even with one. But, if need appeared, or if there were any great cause urging me on, I would contend with right good will against one of those persons who boast themselves a match for any three Greeks. So likewise the Lacedaemonians, when they fight singly, are as good men as any in the world, and when they fight in a body, are the bravest of all. For though they be free-men, they are not in all respects free; Law is the master whom they own; and this master they fear more than thy subjects fear thee. Whatever he commands they do; and his commandment is always the same: it forbids them to flee in battle, whatever the number of their foes, and requires them to stand firm, and either to conquer or die. If in these words, O king! I seem to thee to speak foolishly, I am content from this time forward evermore to hold my peace. I had not now spoken unless compelled by thee. Certes, I pray that all may turn out according to thy wishes."

Such was the answer of Demaratus; and Xerxes was not angry with him at all, but only laughed, and sent him away with words of kindness.

After this interview, and after he had made Mascames the son of Megadostes governor of Doriscus, setting aside the governor appointed by Darius, Xerxes started with his army, and marched upon Greece through Thrace.

*(This is an excerpt borrowed from the Ancient History Sourcebook on the Fordham University webpage. Students who want to read the entire text, including the magnificent description of the Persian army immediately preceding the excerpt above, can go to <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/herodotus-history.txt>)*