

0. XERXES and the IMMORTALS - Story Preface

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Scholars believe this image depicts members of the Immortals, the personal bodyguard of Xerxes. It is from a frieze, originally located at a royal palace in Susa (one of Persia's four capitals). Today is maintained at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. Photo by mshamma, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

Herodotus reports that Xerxes was mulling over how his opponents would react to his overwhelming invasion force. He did not expect to hear the opinion of Demaratus, the exiled-Spartan king:

*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 [Spartans]. 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. (Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.102)*

Incredulous, Xerxes did not believe what he'd heard:

*. . . 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 . . . 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. (Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.103)*

Like so many leaders - before and after him - Xerxes should have heeded the admonition!

On the other hand ... the Great King had his personal bodyguard, an elite fighting force called "The Apple Bearers" and/or "The Immortals." Scholars believe reference to "Immortals" was based on the unit's key feature: Whenever a man died, another instantly took his place.

As such, the Great King's personal guard, who served him in the palace and elsewhere, always fought at full-strength of 10,000 men. Herodotus:

*The Ten Thousand, who were all Persians and all picked men, were led by Hydarnes, the son of Hydarnes. They were called "the Immortals," for the following reason. If one of their body failed either by the stroke of death or of disease, forthwith his place was filled up by another man, so that their number was at no time either greater or less than 10,000 . . . Of all the troops the Persians were adorned with the greatest magnificence, and they were likewise the most valiant. Besides their arms, which have been already described, they glittered all over with gold, vast quantities of which they wore about their persons. (Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.83)*

Are there any surviving pictures of an Immortal? Scholars believe a frieze from the king's palace at Susa - now at the Louvre in Paris - may give us a glimpse of Xerxes' most reliable lancers and archers:

- Archers, most likely from the King's personal guard.

- Additional members of the King's guard.
- A close-up view of the soldier with his lance and quiver.

A test of will, between the Persians and the Spartans, was about to unfold. Demaratus told the Great King what his elite forces would face in battle:

One-against-one, they [the Spartans] are as good as anyone in the world. But when they fight in a body, they are the best of all. For though they are free men, they are not entirely free. They accept Law as their master. And they respect this master more than your subjects respect you. Whatever he commands, they do. And his command never changes: It forbids them to flee in battle, whatever the number of their foes. He requires them to stand firm - to conquer or die. O king, if I seem to speak foolishly, I am content from this time forward to remain silent. I only spoke now because you commanded me to. I do hope that everything turns out according to your wishes. (Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.104. George Rawlinson translation.)

It would be a fight to the death.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/XERXES-and-the-IMMORTALS-300-Battle-of-Thermopylae>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/XERXES-and-the-IMMORTALS-300-Battle-of-Thermopylae>

Questions 2 Ponder

Does Having a Larger Battle Force Always Lead to a Battle Victory?

Xerxes appears to think that just because he has more forces than the Greeks he will win all the battles. Why does he think this way? Do you think he is right? Explain your answer.

Was Demaratus a Traitor?

In what may seem strange today, the Greek city-state of Sparta had two kings not long before the Battle at Thermopylae. Demaratus was one of those kings until he was exiled after a conflict with Cleomenes I (the other Spartan king).

His final, "that's it!" conflict with Cleomenes centered on their disagreement over punishing the leaders of Aegina for seeking an alliance with Persia. Demaratus did not agree that Sparta should take action against Aegina. His position caused Spartans to get upset with Demaratus. They replaced him with his brother Leotychides II.

Driven from Sparta, where would Demaratus go? To Persia, where he sought (and was given) refuge.

Ten years later, Xerxes decided to invade Greece. Demaratus, by this time an advisor of the Great King, dared to tell Xerxes that he could lose against the Greeks. As a Spartan, Demaratus knew how determined the Greeks would be to resist and defeat Xerxes. The Persian ruler, however, decided to proceed with his invasion plans. Demaratus accompanied him as he crossed the Hellespont on the Persians's portable bridge.

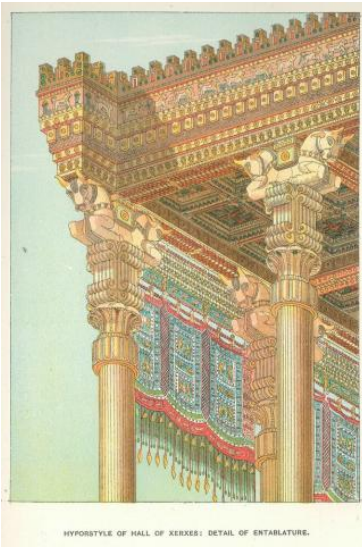
As an exiled Spartan King, Demaratus dares to tell Xerxes what the Great King does not want to hear. What do you make of Demaratus' actions? Is he helping or hurting Xerxes? Is he helping or hurting the Spartans who will end-up facing the Persians at Thermopylae?

If Demaratus is harming the Spartans, because of their actions against him, is that acceptable to you? Why, or why not?

Would you consider Demaratus to be a traitor to the Spartan/Greek cause? Why, or why not?

If you were a leader, like Demaratus, and you were forced-out of your own country, to whom would you likely give your allegiance ... to the people who forced you out or to the people who took you in?

Media Stream



Xerxes - The Palace at Persepolis, Reconstructed

Drawing online, courtesy PersianEmpire.info.

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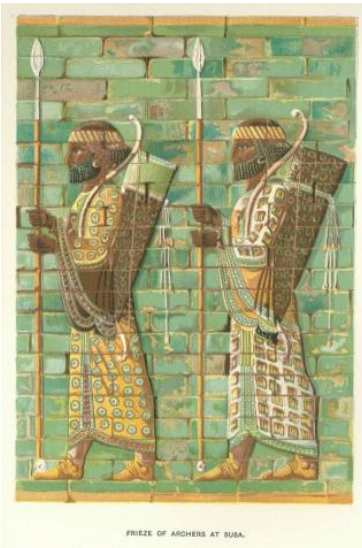


300 - Hydarnes, Leader of the Immortals

Image online, courtesy Livius.

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300 - Xerxes and His Immortals, Archers

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300 - Lance and Quiver of the Immortals

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300 - Immortals, Members of the King's Guard

Photo by mshamma, online courtesy Flickr.

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