

## Herodotus on the Devastation and Plundering of Land

This paper argues that Herodotus' accounts of the devastation of land are carefully structured to expose nature and consequences of this form of warfare, and that Herodotus' main accounts show that devastation of land fails to achieve the attackers' desired military or political ends. It compares Herodotus' account of the Persian king Xerxes' attack on Greece with the story of the Lydian king Alyattes' predations on Miletus before examining other less detailed accounts.

The opportunities or dangers posed by Greek land are one of the Persians' considerations before attacking Greece in 480. Xerxes' cousin Mardonius encourages Xerxes to think of Greece as a rich and fertile land (7.5.3; see Clarke 2018), whereas Xerxes' uncle Artabanus warns him that he will not be able to live off the land (7.49.4). In response to Artabanus, Xerxes states that the Persians are attacking farmers (literally 'plowing men'), not nomads, and that they will not go hungry (7.50.4).

This argument, I will argue, misdirects the reader. The campaign Xerxes undertakes is a campaign of destruction, not a campaign of plundering, since the Persians burn and cut down whatever they can on their way southward through Greece, not just crops, but cities and sanctuaries (8.23 – 50). Directed by his passions rather than his interest, Xerxes destroys the countryside rather than exploiting the farmers he had pictured to himself. The pre-invasion argument between the three men shows them planning rationally, but their behavior contrasts.

The consequences are the stiffening of Greek determination and the starvation of Xerxes' own forces. Herodotus' account of Xerxes' retreat after losing the battle of Salamis shows his

forces eating the grass, and the bark and the leaves of the trees, as they die of dysentery and hunger (8.115).

The story of Alyattes' plundering contrasts to this grim description: Alyattes, king of Lydia, burns Miletan crops annually and makes a festival of it by bringing a band of flutes and pipes to accompany the work. This goes on for eleven years, since the Milesians 'rule the sea' in their area and can ignore the siege. Alyattes, for his part, preserves the farmhouses intact so that the Milesians will have the bases for sowing their crops (1.17).

In the 12<sup>th</sup> year of the incursions, the invaders accidentally set fire to a temple of Athena. Alyattes falls ill, inquires at Delphi, and finds that the Pythia will not answer him until the temple is rebuilt. He therefore sends a messenger to Miletus to ask for a truce (1.19).

This messenger is the opportunity Thrasyboulos, tyrant of Miletus, requires. Bringing out the supplies stored in the city, he has the citizens drink and celebrate while Alyattes' messenger is present. The messenger reports this to Alyattes, with the result that Alyattes, confounded in his expectation that the Milesians would by this time be reduced to misery and starvation, makes peace and an alliance with Miletus (1.22)

This narrative has deeply ironic aspects. It predicates, for instance, that if a plunderer leaves the buildings on the land, the farmers will come back and plant crops, even though they know that their own army will not defend the land against annual invasions, and even though there's plenty of food in the city, for twelve years in a row. Herodotus seems to be telling a story in which the Milesians are playing upon Alyattes' vanity, allowing him to prosecute attacks he thought were clever and harmful in order to distract him from actions that would, in fact, have harmed them. The structure is folktale perfect: in the end, Alyattes' excessively musical

plundering 'parties' are answered and annulled by Thrasyboulos' festival in the presence of Alyattes' messenger.

Thus, both Xerxes and Alyattes practice the harshest form of ravaging (burning of crops, cf. Thorne 2001), both are motivated by passions, both fail to achieve their aims as initial success leads to failure. The paper will conclude by showing other examples of this and suggesting some reasons why Herodotus cast ravaging of land in this light.

### Bibliography

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