

## Artemisia: An Admirable Admiral

[7.99.1–3, 8.68.1–8.69.2, 8.87.1–4, 8.88.1–3, 8.93.2, and 8.101.1–8.103]

By Oliver R. Baker\*

*Claims that Herodotus reveals himself as a proto-biographer, let alone as a proto-feminist, are not yet widely accepted. To help advance these claims, I have selected one remarkable woman—Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus—whose exploits during the second Greco-Persian War are recounted in his Histories. It is to Heraclitus—a near contemporary—to whom we attribute the maxim êthos anthropôî daimôn (ἦθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων)—character is human destiny—and it is the truth of this maxim—implying effective human agency—that makes Herodotus’ creation of historical narrative possible. From his many vignettes, which, without advancing the narrative, Herodotus is able to color-in the character of some of the more notable individuals he depicts in his Histories. Although never the cradle to grave accounts typical of Plutarch, by leap-frogging through two of the nine books, we can assemble a partially continuous narrative, and thus gauge Artemisia’s character. Arguably this permits us to attribute both credit and moral responsibility. And this implied causation demonstrates that Herodotus’ writings include not only proto-biography but in several instances—one of which is given here—proto-feminism.*

### Introduction

Bar Aeschylus’ topical tragedy the *Persei*, first performed in 472 in which Artemisia, queen of Halicarnassus, is not mentioned at all, our only other early extant accounts of the contributions of individual commanders who participate in the naval battle off Salamis in the late summer of 480 are given by Herodotus in his *Histories*.<sup>1</sup> And here, Artemisia, a trusted ally of Xerxes during his punitive expedition against mainland Greece, is given, in six long excerpts spread over two books, almost as much attention as Mardonios, a close royal relative, and

---

\*Tutor-Marker, Simon Fraser University, Canada.

1. Aeschylus, a veteran of Marathon in the summer of 490, may also have been a participant in the naval battle off Salamis—an oarsman or a marine—not just a distant hillside spectator. His tragedy, the *Persians* (Πέρσσαι, *Persai*), with the Ghost of Darius incidentally criticizing Xerxes for hybris (ὑβρις) focuses on the Persian losses at Salamis and predicts further losses come the following year (Plataea). His play is our earliest account of any of the East versus West military/naval encounters during the Greco-Persian Wars. See Aeschylus, *Aeschylus I: The Persians, Seven Against Thebes, The Suppliant Women, Prometheus Bound* (eds.) David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2013): 11-59.

Xerxes' overall battlefield commander.<sup>2</sup> Curiously, our next earliest mention of the queen of Halicarnassus is given in Aristophanes' exceedingly bawdy but topical, anti-war comedy *Lysistrata*, first performed in 411, where Artemisia gets honorable mention on a par with the Amazons.<sup>3</sup> But just as nature abhors a vacuum and rushes to fill it, story-tellers are happy to exploit any glaring lacunae in the historical record. And we can surely blame Herodotus for these glaring lacunae about Artemisia. She is, after all, his own countrywoman, from an aristocratic ruling family. Should he so wish, he of all contemporary individuals is exceedingly well-placed to provide an exhaustive cradle to grave account of her impact on the Dorian colony on the Anatolian coast that her family governed. Why he does not write more about his near contemporary countrywoman is difficult to gauge, although we can speculate that the Athenians in particular are still seething over her impact and their humiliation. Generally, whether of noble birth or not, women are given virtually no role beyond the purely domestic sphere. Nonetheless, one Herodotean scholar has noted fifty-three instances in the *Histories* where women or femininity play a decisive role in the outcome of a particular event.<sup>4</sup> As Rosaria Vignolo Munson comments, "the conspicuous feature of her feminine gender and masculine role, which in all likelihood sparked Herodotus' interest in this extraordinary character, already relates her to the history of the war between the Greeks and Barbarians."<sup>5</sup> But these skills violate every tenet of Athenian patriarchy—the proper and only sphere for women is the domestic, where they—like Victorian children—should be seldom seen or ever heard—a near-invisible non-presence.

---

2. All quotations from the *Histories* are from the Andrea Purvis translation presented in Robert Strassler (Ed.), *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories* (New York, NY: Ransom House, 2007). Herodotus is unable to give us anything that we would recognize as dates. The Julian-Gregorian dates given in the margins of Strassler's edition of the *Histories* are based on other evidence, but unless noted otherwise are those generally agreed by classicists.

3. One modern historian writes: "Ruling queens were not unheard of in the ancient Near East, but fighting queens were exceptional. There were 150,000 men in the Persian fleet at Phaleron, and Artemisia was the only woman. She was rare not only in Persia; she is one of the few female naval commanders in all history," Barry Strauss, *The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter that Saved Greece—And Western Civilization* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004): 95.

4. In an appendix to his article "La Femme et le Pouvoir chez Herodote" Alexandre Tourraix lists the passages from all nine books of the *Histories*: Hdt. 1.1–5, 1.7–14, 1.34, 1.60, 1.73–74, 1.84, 1.91, 1.93, 1.105, 1.107–120, 1.184, 1.185, 1.201; Hdt. 2.1, 2.35, 2.54, 2.104, 2.111, 2.121, 2.151; Hdt. 3.1, 3.31–32, 3.50, 3.68–69, 3.84–88, 3.118–119, 3.124, 3.133–134, 3.150–159; Hdt. 4.1, 4.60, 4.145, 4.154–155; Hdt. 5.12–15, 5.20, 5.39–42, 5.92, 5.126; Hdt. 6.43, 6.51–52, 6.61, 6.107, 6.137–140; Hdt. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.5, 7.75, 7.61–62, 7.205; Hdt. 8.137, Hdt. 9.108–102, 9.122. Tourraix, *Dialogues d'Histoire Ancienne* 2 (1976): 385–386).

5. Rosaria Vignolo Munson, "Artemisia in Herodotus," *Classical Antiquity* 7, no. 1 (1988): 92.

Perhaps, as Munson points out, what really distinguishes Artemisia from all of Xerxes' subordinate commanders is that she is the only one serving under no compulsion whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> Halicarnassus may have been obliged to supply a number of fully crewed triremes, but Artemisia is in no way obliged to command this contingent.<sup>7</sup> Yet, she does so with aplomb and alacrity. Although aristocratic birth presents some measure of opportunity frequently denied those of more modest lineage, Artemisia exercises authority, agency, and autonomy—and in the process proves her destiny as an able leader of men—a remarkable and rare character trait well-befitting an admiral.<sup>8</sup> In so doing she also vastly expands her fulfillment horizon.

### Legendary Heroine

The legendary Artemisia who emerges from centuries of these fascinating but totally unfounded accretions is often inconsistent with Herodotus' account.<sup>9</sup> In the second century, alas some six-hundred years later, even Plutarch gets into the act, as does Polyaeus of Macedonia; but neither give reliable sources for their plausible accretions.<sup>10</sup> Artemisia is a widow, but in all likelihood does not seduce Themistocles during a secret assignation just before the battle off Salamis. But she likely directs her marines to festoon the drowning Kalyndian king's corpse with spears and arrows—just to make sure it floats.<sup>11</sup> However, is it also most unlikely that when spurned by a youthful Persian lover she throws herself off a cliff into the Aegean Sea—she likely had no use whatsoever for a boy toy in the first place.

---

6. Ibid, 95.

7. Her contingent amounts to only five ships—an otherwise trivial less than half of one percent of a combined Persian fleet of over one thousand.

8. We do not know when Artemisia, the governor or queen of Halicarnassus, is born—but when first mentioned by Herodotus she is a widow and is serving as regent for her underage son. Nor does Herodotus mention when her forever-unnamed late spouse—the tyrant of Halicarnassus—died. Whether ever an able ruler or not, he has served his primary purpose—ensuring the succession.

9. If her son was aged at least eighteen in 480 and Artemisia was married in Spartan fashion when in her late teens, a good guess is that she was born no later than 516.

10. Over two millennia later, in his description of the fourth queen in his 1609 *Masque of Queens*, Ben Jonson conflates Herodotus' Artemisia I [c. 515–460] with her eponymous descendant Artemisia II [c. 395–351] (Jonson 324). Many others have made the same erroneous conflation.

11. Phoenician design triremes likely carried the same number of oarsmen in three banks (ἑρέται, *eretai*) as the Greek—170—but were constructed with a full width upper deck permitting them to carry up to 40 marines and archers (ἐπιβάται, *epibatai*) in addition to the deck crew; whereas Greek triremes with only a partial upper deck could only carry 10 to 20 marines and a few archers, see Peter Green, *The Greco-Persian Wars* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 190.

Herodotus makes no mention of her either before or after the two naval battles of 480. In four short paragraphs, Herodotus gives us a few biographic details in his first entry, followed by three anecdotes; the first of the three concerning her interactions with Xerxes after the three-day long but indecisive naval engagement off Artemision which takes place before the battle off Salamis; then an account of an incident during the battle; and, closing with her personal and strategic interactions with Xerxes after their disastrous naval defeat.

### Destiny Defined

The significance of Artemisia's boldly theophoric name cannot be overlooked and at the very least constitutes an interesting challenge to divine Greek myth for the child on the part of her noble parents.<sup>12</sup> Artemis, the goddess of chastity, virginity, archery, the hunt, the forests, the wilderness, and the moon, is only a secondary Olympian deity.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, she is widely worshipped throughout mainland Greece and in the various Dorian and Ionian settlements in the Aegean and on the Anatolian mainland. A number of major festivals are held to honor her including one held every four years at Brauron, north of Athens in eastern Attica, and others at her temples in Ephesus and in Sparta.<sup>14</sup> According to Homer,

---

12. There are only three virgin goddesses among the Olympian pantheon—Artemis, Athena, and Hestia—and although all three have many ardent suitors they certainly have no offspring. They are honored as virgin goddesses partly because they remain chaste and celibate with absolutely no wish to marry; but principally because, bar heeding their father, Zeus, they pursue their own interests independent of any male influence or subservience. Artemis and her twin brother Apollo are the irregular offspring of Zeus and the Titanide Leto. Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth and Esther Edinow (Eds.), *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 176-177, 194, 679.

13. Except when being shown as the moon goddess, Artemis is always depicted wearing a skimpy, off-shoulder, mid-thigh length, slit-skirted Dorian *peplos*—similar to the short tunic, the *chiton exomis*, favored by young Spartan women— in stark contrast to the voluminous, heavily folded, ground-length Ionian *chiton* favored by Athenian women and, of course, the style Athena is invariably depicted as wearing, Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975): 36. A young Spartan woman wearing the *peplos* is often referred to as a thigh flasher *μηρό φώτων* (*miró fóton*) a form of dress eschewed by Athenian women, Pomeroy, *Spartan Women* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 25. Wonder Woman notwithstanding, the skimpy clothing for athletic and fit, Spartan women was likely flattering, whereas from Pomeroy's remarks, far too polite to say as much, that since Athenian women's exercise is limited to housework indoors or in an adjacent courtyard, we might well surmise that their thighs and buttocks are far better not flashed Pomeroy, *Ibid*, 31.

14. See Hdt 6.138.1 for an account of the abduction of young Athenian women when attending the festival held at Brauronia; and, Hdt. 1.26.2 for mention of Artemis' major temple in Ionian Anatolia rebuilt by Croesus in the mid sixth-century. Rebuilt again in the

Artemis is one of the Olympian goddesses who support the Trojans in their war with Greece; Athena, of course, supports the Argives. The unanswered conundrum remains that when the Greek goddesses, one way or another, and Athena in particular, are just as powerful as any of the male gods in the pantheon, and just as widely worshipped, why is the status of Greek women generally kept so low and restricted?<sup>15</sup>

One way to effectively side-line an individual right out of history is to very deliberately write as little about that person as possible.<sup>16</sup> The first few sentences below are the extent of the strictly biographical information that Herodotus gives about his countrywoman, the queen of Halicarnassus. He must have known much more about the ruling family than he gives in book 7 of his *Histories*, and we can only speculate on the reasons for his brevity.<sup>17</sup> Part of this may be Herodotus' belief that to be truly Greek one has to be free; and the Dorian and Ionian island colonies in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Anatolian coast are anything but free; and as a Persian-appointed ruler she and her family are more than complicit in their continued subjugation. Very little is known of Herodotus' early life, but most scholars believe that he leaves Halicarnassus voluntarily, or is indeed exiled moving first to Samos and eventually to Thurii in Italy, but is never free to return home.<sup>18</sup> Herodotus writes:

Although I am not mentioning the other subordinate commanders because I am not compelled to do so, I shall mention Artemisia. I find it absolutely amazing that she,

---

fourth century, eventually becoming three or four times larger than the Parthenon, the temple is ranked among the seven wonders of the ancient world.

15. Recall that Poseidon, the god of the Seas, and Athena, the goddess of Wisdom and Skill compete to be the patron deity of the city-state founded and ruled by its first king, Cecrops—they almost go to war over the honor, but Athena's gift of an olive tree beats Poseidon's brackish spring water supply hands down. She gives her name to the city.

16. In the *Lysistrata*, the Old Men's Chorus Leader laments the women's bold audacity, offering a cautionary reminder of Artemisia's fighting prowess which he also compares with that of the Amazons fighting at Troy against the Argives (Ar. *Lys.* 707–712) [Greek 672 ff.]. See Aristophanes, *Four Plays: Clouds, Birds, Lysistrata, Women of the Assembly* (trans.) Aaron Pochigian. (New York, NY: Norton, 2021), 209-294. Much of the rest comes from the fertile minds of Hollywood's blatantly ahistorical script-writers who in former years felt obliged to meet some mandated steamy seduction scene quota: their 2014 feature film *300: Rise of an Empire* is particularly misleading.

17. From sources other than Herodotus, we know that her father, king Lygdamos, was Greek-Carian and that Artemisia was likely born circa 515–520, see Strauss, *The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter that Saved Greece—And Western Civilization*, 2004, 96-97.

18. One suggestion is that Herodotus' family—or perhaps just a brother—fell afoul of the ruling Lygdamid family and were essentially deemed *persona non grata*—sometimes constructive criticism of an autocratic regime is taken as dissent with a whiff of irreparable disloyalty bordering on treason.

as a woman, should join the expedition against Hellas. After her husband died, she held the tyranny, and then, though her son was a young man of military age and she was not forced to do so at all, she went to war, roused by her own determination and courage. [2] Now the name of this woman was Artemisia; she was the daughter of Lygdamos by race part Halicarnassian on her father's side, and part Cretan on her mother's side. She led the men of Halicarnassus, Kos, Nisyros, and Kalymna, and provided five ships for the expedition. [3] Of the entire navy, the ships she furnished were the most highly esteemed after those of the Sidonians, and of all the counsel offered to the king by the allies, hers was the best. I can prove that all the cities under her leadership which I have just mentioned were Dorian, since the Halicarnassians came from the Troizen and all the rest from Epidaurus (Hdt. 7.99).<sup>19</sup>

A matter Herodotus' text does not make clear is that late in the sixth century Artemisia's father—king Lygdamos I—is appointed by the Persians as ruler of Halicarnassus, so like Gorgo of Sparta, she too is the daughter, queen-consort, and mother of a king. Artemisia's husband, succeeds to her father's satrapy—a succession doubtless enhanced by this marriage.<sup>20</sup> He dies, possibly never ruling, before their son Pisiadelis reaches the age of majority; and so, quite unusually, Artemisia, his mother, is appointed by the Persians to serve as her son's regent.<sup>21</sup>

### No Persian Puppet

Artemisia is married but soon widowed to her father's successor as the tyrant of Halicarnassus. And just as the role of many Greek women—with a few notable Spartan exceptions—is limited to the domestic sphere, it is ironic that Artemisia's husband disappears from all record having fulfilled the barnyard function of ensuring the possibility of succession. That Artemisia is deemed an acceptable regent by Darius and later by Xerxes is notable; and not just because the status of

---

19. Troizen and Epidaurus are both Dorian city-states in the eastern Peloponnese. When Athens is evacuated after the battle of Thermopylae the non-combatants: mothers and children are taken to Aegina, Salamis, and Troizen.

20. This suggests strongly that Artemisia is an only child (or an only surviving child) and as an heiress attractive to those aristocratic Carians/Halicarnassians with ambitions for royal appointment to the local governorship. Her family is Dorian rather than Ionian and so they may adopt the more liberal Spartan *patrouchoi* precedents rather than those for Athenian *epikloroi*. Either way, her husband's line is terminated. Although the throne is infinitely less exalted than that for Sparta, let alone Persia, this is another of many similarities she shares with Gorgo, and Atossa and perhaps even Helen of Sparta.

21. That her spouse remains nameless is priceless. Athenians never name their womenfolk and dismiss their genetic contribution as incubators—Artemisia's spouse is a nameless inseminator.

widows who decline to remarry is often problematic in many societies.<sup>22</sup> Just as significant, five sailing masters and their deck and below deck crews accept Artemisia as their admiral—this is not an empty honorific, they are granting her real agency as their flotilla commander. By so doing they are putting their well-being, opportunities for glory, battle-honors, and survival in her hands. Herodotus tells us in book 6 that in the aftermath of the Ionian revolt Mardonios commands a large land army and a fleet which he leads down to Cilicia and then sweeps up the Anatolian coasts toward the Hellespont (Hdt. 6.43.1–4).<sup>23</sup> From Herodotus' account Mardonios deposes all the tyrants of the Ionians and establishes democracies in their cities. This is possibly an exaggeration; all Darius wants is for these city-states to continue paying annual tribute and to respond to his requests for levees for military expeditions.

We know that Darius divides his empire into some twenty large provinces or satrapies and each province is governed by a satrap appointed by the king and to serve at his pleasure. Herodotus does not name these provinces but he does number them and the first province includes much of the Anatolian coast (Hdt. 3.89–90).<sup>24</sup> We also know that in the middle of the sixth century the Dorian city-states, including three on Rhodes, form a loose alliance and hold an annual festival which they celebrate at the Triopian sanctuary. Herodotus writes:

In the same way the five cities of the Dorians (formerly known as the six cities of the Dorians) refuse to admit any neighboring Dorians to their Triopian sanctuary. Moreover, they bar all those who break any of the rules of the sanctuary from participating in the rites and activities there (Hdt. 1.144.1).

Although Herodotus gives us few details, the Carians are involved in the Ionian revolt, but he does not specifically say that the Halicarnassians join in and one inference is that they do not. Again, we resort to the argument from silence, where in this instance it is inconceivable that Herodotus does not know or is misinformed. Either way, it appears from his commentary that the ruling family or the aristocracy in general, are regarded as loyal and reliable. We know that Artemisia is permitted to serve as regent for her then underage son, so even if she is not personally known to the Persian monarchs, she is deemed an acceptable place holder. Likely she earns this esteem long before supporting Xerxes' invasion

---

22. In this respect, as widows, Gorgo, Atossa, and Artemisia face the same challenge—except that we know that for internal dynastic reasons Atossa is compelled to re-marry twice, whereas Gorgo and Artemisia are at liberty to decline and indeed do so.

23. Mardonios is not just a Persian general. He is Darius' nephew, brother-in-law, and son-in-law. His mother is Darius' sister, his sister is one of Darius' wives, and he is married to one of Darius' daughters, Artazostre.

24. See Hdt. 3.90.1—for the first provincial district: the Ionians, the Magnesians of Asia, the Aeolians, Carians, Lycians, Milyans, and Pamphylians, all of whom were assessed as a single unit for payment of tribute, some 400 talents of silver.

with five manned triremes and is thus admitted to such military councils as Xerxes chooses to hold from time to time.

### An Admirable Admiral

Sometime after the inconclusive naval battle off Artemision, but just before Xerxes' disastrous engagement off Salamis, Herodotus recounts:<sup>25</sup>

So Mardonios made his way around and questioned them, beginning with the Sidonian. They all expressed the same opinion, urging him to initiate a battle at sea, except for Artemisia who said:<sup>26</sup>

"Speak to the King for me, Mardonios, and tell him what I say, since I have not proven to be the worst fighter in his naval battles off Euboea, nor have I performed the least significant of feats.<sup>27</sup> Tell him, 'My Lord, it is right and just that I express my opinion, and what I think is best regarding your interests. Here is what I think you should do: spare your fleet; do not wage a battle at sea. For their men surpass yours in strength at sea to the same degree that men surpass women. [2] And why is it necessary for you to risk another sea battle? Do you not already hold Athens, the very reason for which you set out on this campaign? And do you not have the rest of Hellas too? No one is standing in your way; those who have stood against you have ended up as they deserved.

"Let me tell you what I think your foes will end up doing. If you do not rush into waging a sea battle, but instead wait and keep your ships near land, or even if you advance to the Peloponnese, then, my lord, you will easily achieve what you intended by coming here. [2] The Hellenes are incapable of holding out against you for very long; you will scatter them, and each one will flee to his own city. For I hear that they have no food with them on this island, and if you lead your army to the Peloponnese, it is unlikely that those who came from there will remain where they are now and concern themselves with fighting at sea for the Athenians.

"But if you rush into a sea battle immediately, I fear that your fleet will be badly mauled, which would cause the ruin of your land army as well. And there is one more thing that you should think about, sire, and keep in mind: bad slaves tend to

---

25. Much ink has been expended by scholars interpreting Herodotus while attempting to come up with acceptable dates for the three-days of naval battles off Artemis, Leonidas' three-day battle at Thermopylae, and the one-day naval battle off Salamis. The best surmises are mid-September for the first two, and late September for the latter: see James Allen Stuart Evans, "Notes on Thermopylae and Artemision," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* Bd. 18, H. 4 (1969): 392 and 401; and, Kenneth S. Sacks, "Herodotus and the Dating of the Battle of Thermopylae," *Classical Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1976): 245-246.

26. At this time Sidon along with Tyre are the two most powerful Phoenician city-states.

27. See Hdt. 8.9-10, this is the first we learn of Artemisia's participation in the inconclusive naval battles off Artemision ten days or so earlier during the late summer of 480.



belong to good people, while good slaves belong to bad people. And you, the best of all men, have the worst slaves, who are said to be included among your allies, namely, the Egyptians, Cyprians, Cilician, and Pamphylians; they are absolutely worthless.”

As Artemisia was speaking to Mardonios, all those who were well-disposed toward her thought her words most unfortunate, since they believed she would suffer some punishment from the King for telling him not to wage a battle at sea. On the other hand, those who were envious and jealous of her, because she was honored as one of the most prominent of the allies, were delighted by her response to the question, thinking that she would perish for it. [2] When these opinions were reported to Xerxes, however, he was quite pleased with Artemisia’s answer. Even prior to this, he had considered her worthy of his serious attention, but now he held her in even higher regard. Nevertheless, his orders were to obey the majority; he strongly suspected that off Euboea they had behaved like cowards because he was not present, but now he was fully prepared to watch them fight at sea (Hdt. 8.68–69).<sup>28</sup>

Just as the three virgin goddesses, Artemis, Athena and Hestia, who never marry; and, except to their father Zeus, remain accountable for their own actions and are never answerable to any of the other Olympian deities, Artemisia of Halicarnassus keeps her own counsel.<sup>29</sup> Having listened to the advice of his commanders, with only Artemisia dissenting, Xerxes commits to an immediate naval engagement. Perhaps Xerxes surrounds himself with too many sycophants who will ultimately serve him poorly—he needs independent minded councilors who are not afraid to tell him when he is in error—but we can infer that rightly or wrongly he has already decided on a course of action, and any meeting of commanders is just for a show of unity. Doubtless Artemisia perceives a closed mind, which is why she asks Mardonios to speak for her—if only to speak for the record. She has the courage to voice her convictions, but the loyalty and discipline to obey her emperor’s orders without further dissent.

I cannot speak with certainty about the rest of them, how each specific group of barbarians and Hellenes performed in the fighting, but this is what happened to Artemisia, which resulted in her winning still higher esteem from the King. [2] The King’s fleet had reached a state of mass confusion, and it was during this crisis that Artemisia’s ship was pursued by one from Attica. She was unable to escape it because there were so many other friendly ships in front of her, and since her own ship was closest to those of the enemy, she made a decision which turned out to be very much to her advantage. While she was still being chased by the Attic ship, she rammed at full speed, a friendly ship manned by Kalyndians and the king of the Kalyndians himself, Damasithymos. [3] Now I cannot say if there was some quarrel

---

28. Herodotus does not record Artemisia’s reaction to Xerxes’ rejection of her advice. She may well have thought, “You incredible fool” but kept this to herself.

29. Nor, quite unlike Hestia, the least anthropomorphic of all female figures among the Olympic pantheon, does she become a respected but somewhat colorless mature spinster.

she had with him that had arisen while they were still near the Hellespont, or even whether, when she ran into the Kalyndian ship, the deed was premeditated or accidental. [4] But when she rammed it, the good she accomplished for herself was twofold. For when the trierarch of the Attic ship saw that she was ramming a ship of the barbarians, he assumed that Artemisia's vessel was either a Greek ship or one that was deserting from the barbarians and now fighting for the Hellenes, so he turned away from her ship to attack others (Hdt. 8.87.1–4).

Surely Herodotus is disingenuous here rather than just diplomatic. He claims that he does not know whether or not there was some cause of a quarrel between Artemisia and Damasithymos, and then proceeds to name the time and place; his audience will be suspicious that this is an allusion for insiders only.<sup>30</sup> We can argue from his silence. If the incident at the Abydos crossing of the Straits is sufficiently salacious—such as Xerxes being concealed in a rolled-up carpet and frequently smuggled by his bodyguards into her sleeping quarters—Herodotus could not have resisted including it.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps there is a well-known, but not very interesting, long-standing enmity between the two city-states, Halicarnassus and Kalynda, or between their ruling families? More likely, Damasithymos is simply envious of her renown and sufficiently boorish to cast insulting, misogynistic aspersions at her expense behind her back, figuring that he would get away with them.<sup>32</sup>

That was one result to her advantage: she escaped and was not destroyed. But another outcome was that, even though she was doing harm to her own side, she won the highest possible praise from Xerxes. [2] For it is said that as the King was watching, he noticed one ship ramming the other, and one of the men with him said, "My lord, do you see how well Artemisia is fighting, and how she has sunk an enemy ship?" Xerxes inquired if it was truly Artemisia who had accomplished this feat, and they confirmed that it was, clearly recognizing the ensign of her vessel, and believing that the one she had destroyed belonged to the enemy. [3] So all that, as I have explained, brought her good fortune. And in addition, no one from the Kalyndian ship survived

---

30. From Herodotus we know that Artemisia also commanded the contingents from the nearby island kingdoms of Kos, Nisyros, and Kalymna (Hdt.7.99), the latter not to be confused with the nearby city-state to the south-west, Kalyndos (Κάλυνδος) governed by king Damasithymos.

31. In addition to Artemisia not being truly Greek, despite her Dorian ethnicity, Herodotus may be suggesting that culturally some of the *royal barbaric power* has rubbed off on her and that as a Persian-appointed governor she readily adopts any degree of ruthlessness necessary to get the job done. If a *bête noir's* vessel happens to get in her way, of course, she will plough straight through it. She might even ask her marines to give its former commander a few spears to aid his corpse's flotation.

32. Happenstance perhaps, but fully in character with her Olympian eponym, Artemis, who has a habit of emptying her quiver into anyone arrogant enough to make an unsolicited lecherous advance. Artemis even dispatches her boon hunting companion Orion, Poseidon's mortal son by Euryale, in this manner—perhaps in error.

to become her accuser. In response to what he had heard, Xerxes is reported to have said, "My men have become women, and my women, men!" (Hdt. 8.88.1–3).

### A Double Standard, even for Medizing

Although we can infer that it is the Athenians, Herodotus does not say precisely which party among the League offers the reward for the capture of Artemisia. But the reasons he gives are unconvincing—and one suspects, but cannot prove, that there was much more to it than just her gender.<sup>33</sup> Nor does he indicate whether the commanders of the many other Ionian and Dorian naval contingents allied to Xerxes are similarly proscribed. But we can argue from his silence that they were not. We might also observe a strange paradox; Alexander I of Macedon goes out of his way to be accepted as Greek and the Peloponnesian League turn a forgiving blind eye to the accommodations he makes over the years with both Darius and Xerxes to remain in power. In contrast, Artemisia is accepted as Greek, evidently to her great disadvantage, as the League does not grant her the same leniency over the same politically and militarily necessary realities.<sup>34</sup> Possibly in land battles it is easier to disguise indifference to vigorous engagement, whereas in fleet action—at that time, an archery, ramming, and boarding contest at sea performed at a leisurely five or six knots—such action avoidance is harder to conceal whether Xerxes is actually watching or not.

Of the Hellenes who fought in this naval battle at Salamis, praise for the greatest valor went to the Aeginetans, and after them to the Athenians; of individual men, to Polykritos of Aegina and the Athenians Eumenes of Anagyrous and Ameinias of Pallene. It was Ameinias who had pursued Artemisia; if he had realized that she was sailing on that ship, he would not have stopped before capturing her or being taken himself, [2] for orders to capture her has been given to the Athenian trierarchs, and a prize of 10,000 drachmas has been offered to whoever captured her alive, since they considered it a disgrace that a woman should wage war on Athens. But as I described earlier, she managed to escape, and there were others whose ships had survived also who were all now at Phaleron (Hdt. 8.93).

---

33. We know that her five ships fight well at Artemision, Herodotus lets her tell us so (Hdt. 8.68.1). Perhaps she comes to Athenian notice then. But she too ignores the messages left by Themistocles urging the Ionians to detach themselves from the Barbarian forces, or if that is not possible to be neutral, or at the very least fight very poorly (Hdt. 8.19 and 8.22.1–3). Actually, Themistocles likely hopes that Xerxes will hear of these messages and not trust his Carian allies.

34. Lynette Mitchell makes the point that from a purely Athenocentric perspective anyone from a city on the fringes of the Greek world, particularly a woman, would be regarded with both suspicion and fascination; see Lynette G. Mitchell, "The Women of Ruling Families," *Classical Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2012): 12, 16, 20-21.

This promised Athenian bounty—ninety-five pounds of silver—needs some explanation beyond perceived disgrace by the Athenians and the gender discrimination later voiced by Xerxes equating female gender with cowardice. None of the other Ionian commanders attracted bounties for their capture—whether dead or alive Herodotus does not say. Herodotus' final entry directly concerning Artemisia takes place in Xerxes' campaign headquarters, presumably near Phaleron, shortly following the disastrous naval battle off Salamis and comprises three paragraphs:

Xerxes felt as much joy and pleasure in hearing this as he could, considering his adversities. He told Mardonios that he would first consult with others about the two courses before giving him an answer. And while he was deliberating with his specially chosen counselors, he decided to summon Artemisia to join the consultation, because she had obviously been the only one before who had correctly perceived what should be done. [2] When Artemisia arrived, Xerxes sent away all of the others, his counselors as well as his bodyguards, and said to her, "Mardonios bids me to stay and make an attempt on the Peloponnese, claiming that the Persians—the land army, that is—are not to blame for the disaster, and that they want to display proof of that. [3] In any case, he bids me to do that, or if not, he wants to pick out 300,000 troops from the army and completely enslave Hellas, and bids me lead the rest of the army back to my homeland. [4] Well, then, since you counseled me well by trying to prevent me from waging the naval battle that has taken place, please tell me now how I can prosper through your good advice."

Thus he requested her advice, and this is what she told him: "Sire, it is difficult for me to give the best advice to you, as you are seeking the best possible course of action, but in view of the present situation, it seems to me that you should go back home, and if Mardonios wants and promises to do what he has suggested, leave him behind here with the men of his choice. For if he does subjugate this land as he claims he would like to do and thus succeeds in this plan, the success will be yours, my lord, since the conquest will be performed by your slaves. On the other hand, if the outcome is the opposite of what Mardonios thinks will happen, it will be no great misfortune, since you will survive and so will your power in Asia as far as your house is concerned. [3] And if you and your house survive, the Hellenes will have to run many races for their lives. Besides, if something happens to Mardonios, it is of no great consequence. And if the Hellenes win, they will not win anything substantial by destroying your slave, while you will march home after you have burned Athens, and thus will have achieved the goal of your expedition (Hdt. 8.101–8.102).

Strangely, Artemisia's strategic advice very closely matches that given to Xerxes by Artabanos four years earlier, long before the Persians muster their army and embark on their punitive expedition (Hdt. 7.10.Θ.1–3).

Xerxes was delighted with this advice, for she had succeeded in telling him exactly what he was thinking himself. But I suppose that even if all the men and women in the world had advised him to stay, he would not have done so, such was his state of

utter terror. After praising Artemisia, he sent her off to take his sons to Ephesus, for some of his illegitimate sons had accompanied him (Hdt. 8.103).

### Surrounded by Yes-Men

Evidently all Xerxes is waiting for is for one of his more credible and selfless commanders to openly recommend the course of action he was going to adopt anyway. Entrusting her with the safe return to Susa of his offspring demonstrates that he has no doubts about either her loyalty or seamanship. Herodotus' narrative about the conclusion of the second Greco-Persian war continues in book 9 of his *Histories* with the land battle at Plataea and what might have been a naval engagement off Samos, but which becomes a land battle at Mycale on the Anatolian mainland. Herodotus does not say whether or not Artemisia's ships are involved in the campaign during the summer of 479, although he mentions that the Phoenicians are sent away (Hdt. 9.96). Perhaps Artemisia's fleet are sent away, too? He cannot leave the whole coast unprotected.

When the Hellenes had destroyed the majority of the barbarians, both those fighting and those fleeing, they set fire to the enemy ships and to the entire wall. But before they did that, they collected and removed all the spoils to the beach, and there discovered that among the items they had seized were some treasure chests full of riches. After setting fire to the wall they sailed away in their ships.

[2] When they arrived at Samos, the Hellenes held a conference to discuss the evacuation of the Ionians and in which part of Hellas under Greek control they might be settled, because they were considering the abandonment of Ionia to the barbarians. On the one hand, it seemed impossible for them to protect the Ionians by guarding their land forever, but on the other, they knew that if they did not somehow protect the Ionians, the latter would have no hope of escaping punishment at the hands of the Persians. [3] In view of these considerations, the Peloponnesians in office at the time thought it best to depopulate the trading centers of those Greek peoples who had medized and to allow the Ionians to inhabit those lands.<sup>35</sup>

But the Athenians believed that Ionia should not be evacuated at all, and that the Peloponnesians should not determine what would happen to Athenian colonists. In the face of their vehement opposition, the Peloponnesians yielded to them. [4] And so it was in this way that the Hellenes admitted into their alliance the Samians, Chians, Lesbians, and the other islanders who had joined the Greek side in the fight, and they obliged them with pledges and oaths to remain faithful to the alliance and not to desert it. After binding them to the alliance with sworn oaths, they sailed off to break up the bridges, which they thought would still be intact (Hdt. 9.106.1-4).<sup>36</sup>

---

35. This primarily naval force is under the overall command of the Spartan king, Leotychidas. The command of the Athenian contingent fell to Xanthippos (Hdt. 8.130.1-3).

36. After the battle off Salamis in the late summer of 480, Xerxes retreats with part of his army through Thessaly, Macedonia, and Thrace to the Chersonese. Here he discovers that autumn storms have already destroyed his floating bridges across the Dardanelles to

The Spartan proposal involving mass relocations is perhaps grossly impractical, but their point about the impossibility, not to mention the cost, of garrisoning every Ionian colony on the Anatolian coast in perpetuity (and presumably every Dorian settlement, too) is strictly pragmatic. The settlements in the Cyclades Islands can deter invasion with their own naval forces and resist any attempts at siege until aid arrives from the mainland, but strong, fully-manned, naval squadrons on constant patrol, except for the winter months, are needed to protect the more distant islands such as Rhodes, Samos, Chios, and Cos.

Critically this is Herodotus' first mention of an alliance headed up by Athenians, soon known as the Delian League. Up until this time the forces opposing Xerxes have been under the umbrella of the Sparta-led Peloponnesian League, with a handful of city-states outside of the Peloponnese including Athens, admitted as ad hoc members for the duration of the hostilities (Hdt. 9.106.4). Once again Artemisia proves to be prescient, even with a crushing League victory the Spartans are still either isolationist or preoccupied with threats nearer home—or both—they do not have their own navy and their hoplite army seldom ventures beyond the Peloponnese—the ghost of Cleomenes could have told anyone that much without recourse to Delphi.

Anyone familiar with the sixth-century territorial ambitions of Cyrus the Great—and we can include Queen Artemisia—would be aware that in 546 the Ionians sent messengers to Sparta asking for help in their struggle against Cyrus (Hdt. 1.141.4 and 1.151.1). Herodotus writes:

The Lacedaemonians, however, refused to heed this plea and decided against helping the Ionians against Cyrus, so the messengers departed. However, in spite of having turned the Ionians away, the Lacedaemonians dispatched some men in a penteconter—I presume in order to spy on the affairs of Cyrus and the Ionians. And when they arrived in Phocaea, they sent the most distinguished man with them, named Lakrines, to Sardis to declare to Cyrus in the name of the Lacedaemonians that he must not inflict reckless damage on any city in Hellenic territory, since the Lacedaemonians would not tolerate it (Hdt. 1.152.2).

Cyrus' response to this threatened *line in the sand* from Sparta is a succinct *middle or Median finger*, and a gentle reminder for Spartans to mind their own business:

They say that when the herald had delivered this message, Cyrus questioned the Hellenes who were with him, asking them who were these Lacedaemonians who would send such a command to him, and how many of them were there? When he heard their response, he said to the Spartan herald, "I have never feared any men who have a place in the center of the city set aside for meeting together, swearing false oaths, and cheating one another, and if I live long enough, Lacedaemonians will

---

the Hellespont. The remnants of the trireme fleet that fought at Salamis and supporting transport vessels ferry the king and his troops to Abydos on the Asian side (Hdt. 8.130).

have troubles of their own about which to converse, rather than those of the Ionians” (Hdt. 153.1).

From what Herodotus tells us, Cleomenes, his forefathers and his successors do not need to hear Cyrus’ threat—even the scantiest knowledge of Eastern Mediterranean geography informs the Spartan kings that the Anatolian coast, let alone Susa, is too far away. The Persians might come at him in force, but that is different—and for that, blame the Athenians for foolishly starting a fight that they would need help to finish.

### Conclusions: A Dorian Amazon?

What can we deduce about Artemisia’s character from the four extended anecdotes that Herodotus provides? He goes to considerable lengths to give her genealogy as more Dorian than Carian, let alone Ionian; and it is fair to ask why. When describing the battle off Salamis Herodotus appears to be comparing her role as a trusted military/naval advisor to Xerxes to the parallel strategic discussions where Themistocles is having with other members of the Hellenic Alliance. Xerxes’ treatment of her is gender neutral—she is one of his more trusted and able commanders and that is all there is to it.<sup>37</sup> Neither fish nor fowl—Artemisia, unlike Atossa is not the consort to a Persian emperor. But to her credit she has earned agency, autonomy, and authority: moreover, she is prepared to accept the cost—accountability.<sup>38</sup> Nor has she been obliged to become androgynous-like Artemis or Athena to achieve this—she takes a spouse and is a child-bearer. Unlike Gorgo she is not the consort of a Spartan king. But when presented with an opportunity to expand her scope of personal fulfillment well beyond the domestic—an opportunity she likely did not seek—she does not demur. She is an effective ruler in her own right, and it is this effectiveness that Herodotus admires, but one his contemporary audience will find disturbing with an ambivalence fluctuating between admiration and revulsion.

On a personal and domestic level, the Greek commanders have no difficulty seeing themselves fulfilling three roles for their wives: father for their children, but companion, and lover for their children’s mother; but they are blind to the notion that their spouses might well see themselves fulfilling three similar roles

---

37. Richard Stoneman argues that Xerxes is dominated by strong women; initially by his mother (obviously), then by his principal (and only wife), and that perhaps he was similarly impressed by Artemisia, see Richard Stoneman, *Xerxes: A Persian Life* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2015), 9, 30, 123. But unless Xenophon or Strabo have given scholars independent evidence, then this is just a Stoneman interpretation of Herodotus, perhaps overly influenced by modern popular novelists.

38. These three essential elements—the three A’s— are always present in whichever wave of feminist theory you scrutinize let alone adopt.

for their husbands—namely *hetairai*, but not just *pornai*, *pallakai*, and *gynaikai*. Just as the men have temporarily suspended their domestic responsibilities to go to war, Artemisia, albeit a widow, has done much the same thing.<sup>39</sup> The Athenian playwright's jest about her being an Amazon is dangerously telling, and that is not just because the Amazons, like Artemis, fought on the Trojan's side against the Hellenes.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, do diplomatic events in Anatolia all within living memory have any bearing on her style of governance?<sup>41</sup> Artemisia will doubtless have heard of the very similar rebuff given by the Spartan king Cleomenes in 500 when Aristagoras, the tyrant of Miletus, comes to Sparta soliciting his interest in a self-financing raid on the Persian capital Susa (Hdt. 5.49.1–4, 7–9). All Spartan interest vanishes, if there ever was any, when Cleomenes learns that the Persian capital is a three-month long journey inland from the coast (Hdt. 5.50.2). That Aristagoras is successful in obtaining Athenian interest is the cause of Darius' crushing of the Ionian Revolt early in the fifth century, and one of the reasons behind several Persian punitive expeditions to mainland Greece and the two Greco-Persian wars. In short, as the ruler of Halicarnassus Artemisia knows that causing trouble for Xerxes and then relying on Athens, let alone Sparta, for military protection forever afterwards is naïve if not downright foolhardy. This puts her in a similar position to that of Alexander of Macedon. She best serves her subjects, let alone her own family, by keeping Xerxes' garrison troops well out of her domain and by giving Xerxes no cause to dismiss her and appoint a Persian aristocrat to her governorship—in short, pay the agreed tribute on time, respond promptly to troop levies, and do not knowingly harbor malcontents.<sup>42</sup>

From a biographical viewpoint, Herodotus only gives us six entries for Artemisia, but from these it is evident that she becomes not only an admirable

39. One of the more famous dictums of Demosthenes comes to mind, "Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households" (Demosthenes, Orations 59.122).

40. The Amazons, who Herodotus tells us come from a region in northern Anatolia and who perhaps inveigle young Scythian warriors to come ashore solely for breeding purposes—copulation on demand for procreation—are always depicted dressed very much like Artemis, wearing the short Spartan peplos with right shoulder bare (Hdt. 4.111.2–4.113.1). From post Homeric sources we know that the Amazons are skilled mounted archers and fought against the Greeks during the Trojan War. There are also mythical stories of Theseus and the Amazons attacking Athens.

41. As Michel Austin comments that whatever happened in Ionia after the revolt, it did not affect other dynastic regimes elsewhere, including Caria, but that Xerxes inherited his father's Greek connections, see Michel Mervyn Austin, "Greek Tyrants and the Persians," *Classical Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1990): 306.

42. As hinted at by several scholars, appearances are sometimes not deceptive at all and this may be why Herodotus and possibly his family become *personae non gratae* in Halicarnassus.



admiral—one of the very few sea-going female flotilla commanders in all of history—but in Halicarnassus where already an able admired administrator and regent—exceptional achievements and dazzling personal fulfillment far beyond those expected let alone permitted of a royal incubator. But we only get a glimpse of a very short period of her life—a few months—hardly cradle to grave, although surely enough to gauge her character—hence the claim for Herodotus as a proto-biographer. Herodotus reveals his personal reaction to her exploits, through those of her Persian allies and her Greek opponents. Bar the latter, these are very positive appraisals.

We can only speculate about the reasoning behind the fifth-century Athenian anathema. The simplest explanation is not just that she shows them up at Artemision.<sup>43</sup> I believe that the Athenian patriarchy cannot accept the notion that a Dorian woman can be such an accomplished military leader. Hence the conclusion that she must be some sort of Amazon—not just *other*, and not just a *barbarian*, but something quite *monstrous*—a throwback to myth beyond the dark ages. Ancient Greek legend has it that Athens experienced trouble previously with Amazons, and genocide is deemed quite appropriate. Herodotus' depiction of Artemisia in his *Histories* rejects extermination, but offers recognition—she's marvelous, praiseworthy, not monstrous. Wary of audience hostility, he resists telling us as much as he likely knows. Without reservation, Herodotus is happy to give credit where he believes it is due. Concepts exist long before creating any underlying theory and any attribution or identification with some signifier. Artemisia is an admirable admiral, and hence the modest claim that despite writing from a pre-feminist perspective Herodotus breaks rank to reveal himself as a proto-feminist, two and a half millennia before there were words for such alternative perspectives.

## Bibliography

Aeschylus. *Aeschylus I: The Persians, Seven Against Thebes, The Suppliant Women, Prometheus Bound*. Edited and Translated by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Third Edition. Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

---

43. Remember the bounty for her live capture is posted before the battle off Salamis. Precisely what the Athenians had in mind for her, Herodotus does not say—possibly a show trial at noon, grandstanding the verdict, a ceremonial bounty award, followed by execution before sundown? Several different methods, or perhaps a combination of methods, were practiced in fifth-century Athens: a form of crucifixion by strangulation—*apotumpanismos* (ἀποτυμπανισμός); or the victim being tossed either alive or dead into the *barathron* (βάραθρον)—a deep cleft in the rock face behind the Acropolis, see Louis Gernet, “Capital Punishment,” in Peter John Rhodes (ed.), *Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 137.

- Aristophanes. *Four Plays: Clouds, Birds, Lysistrata, Women of the Assembly*. Translated by Aaron Poochigian. New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corp., Division of W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 2021.
- Austin, Michel Mervyn. "Greek Tyrants and the Persians, 546–479 B.C." *Classical Quarterly*, New Series 40, no. 2 (1990): 289-306.
- Evans, James Allen Stuart. "Notes on Thermopylae and Artemision." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* Bd. 18, H. 4 (1969): 389-406.
- Gernet, Louis. "Capital Punishment." In Peter John Rhodes (ed.), *Athenian Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 132-158.
- Green, Peter. *The Greco-Persian Wars*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996.
- Hornblower, Simon, Antony Spawforth and Esther Edinow (Eds.) *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Fourth Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Jonson, Ben. *The Masque of Queens* (1609), ed. David Lindley in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* volume 3, 1606-1611, edited by David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Mitchell, Lynette G. "The Women of Ruling Families in Archaic and Classical Greece." *Classical Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2012): 1-21.
- Munson, Rosaria Vignolo. "Artemisia in Herodotus." *Classical Antiquity* 7, no. 1 (1988): 91-106.
- Pomeroy, Sarah . *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books, 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Spartan Women*. Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Sacks, Kenneth S. "Herodotus and the Dating of the Battle of Thermopylae." *The Classical Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (1976): 232-248.
- Stoneman, Richard. *Xerxes: A Persian Life*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2015.
- Strassler, Robert (Ed.) *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*. Translated by Andrea L. Purvis. New York, NY: Random House, 2007.
- Strauss, Barry. *The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter that Saved Greece—And Western Civilization*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2004.
- Tourraix, Alexandre. "La Femme et le pouvoir chez Hérodote." [Woman and Power in Herodotus]. *Dialogues d'Histoire Ancienne* 2 (1976): 369-386.