CHAPTER 3

The Policy of Xerxes towards Thrace and Macedonia (480–479)

The Preparations of Xerxes for the Campaign against Greece

Darius started the preparation of a new punitive act against the disobedient Athenians immediately after the defeat at Marathon. In Herodotus’ view the preparation took three years, but the act itself was not performed because of rebellious Egypt and, eventually, because of Darius’ death (486).1 Xerxes, his son and successor, was compelled to fight the Egyptians2 as well as the Babylonians,3 and only after the suppression of the revolts did he undertake the realization of the expedition planned by Darius against Greece.

Having learned a lesson from the unsuccessful sea campaign against Athens and Eretria, Xerxes decided to carry out the future expedition with the help both of considerable naval forces and of a large army. Undoubtedly, this act was expected to lead to much more impressive results, since Xerxes was obviously influenced by the success of Darius’ progress towards the Istros, as well as Mardonius’ towards the Strymon. In fact, as it later proved to be true, the choice of a similar tactic shows that Xerxes did not intend to take unnecessary risks as far as the recession of the infantry from the coast was concerned.

One of the conditions necessary for the successful outcome of a campaign that includes numerous land forces is the presence of good logistical support: the provisions needed for the army must be supplied and the army’s ability to reach hostile lands must be guaranteed. The preparations should be made in regions as close as possible to enemy lands. This is the very reason for the lively activity on the Aegean coast, lasting a couple of years.4 Many preparations

---

1 Hdt. vii.1.1–3, 4.1.
2 Ibid. vii.7.1–8.1.
4 Herodotus (vii.20.1) claims that Xerxes needed four full years to get all the necessary things prepared for the campaign against Greece, and it was the fifth year when he undertook the enterprise. As Tuplin has brought to my attention, riots broke out in Babylonia during Xerxes’ second year (484/3), which, despite being short-lived, were viewed as a serious affair by the Persians. This may mean that the great preparations for the invasion of Greece did not begin earlier than the year 483, which does not exclude the possibility of minor preparations to
were made, a sign of the greatness of the enterprise and of Xerxes’ earnest intentions.

According to Herodotus, three years before the expedition, on Xerxes’ orders, the digging of a canal through Athos peninsula started. The purpose of this was to help the Persian navy avoid the dangerous circumvention of the peninsula. The realization of this ambitious project was assigned to Bubares and Artachaees, and the people who dug the canal were recruited from the peninsula itself and from other areas subjected to the Great King. Those same people who dug the canal were also assigned the building of bridges over the Strymon, a task with narrower dimensions but as important as the canal in regard to the unhindered progress of the infantry. For the building of the pontoon-bridges over both the Strymon and the Hellespont, the Phoenicians and the Egyptians had to twist ropes.

Parallel to this activity, large amounts of food were stored for both the army and the pack animals. Herodotus mentions the names of four settlements where this was done: Leuce Acte, where the major share of the food supplies were stored, Tyrodiza, Doriscus, and Eion. He also mentions Macedonia, but does not specify the exact location where the necessary provisions were stored. The most probable place is Therme, for Xerxes camped in it with his entire army.

---

5 Hdt. vii.22.1–24.1. Demetrius of Scepsis makes the assumption that the Persians, due to the stony soil, did not manage to dig the canal through Athos and make it navigable (Strabo vii. fr. 35 Meineke). Scholars show that Demetrius is wrong, and accordingly it is possible for the canal to have been dug in such a way that the Persian navy could use it. For the issue see Isserlin 1991: 83–91; Isserlin et al. 1994: 277–284; Isserlin et al. 1996: 329–340; Isserlin et al. 2003: 369–385. See also Papangelos, Kamburoglu 1998: 177–188.


7 Ibid. vii.25.1; Macan 1908: 1.1 ad vii.25; Schrader 1985: 68n68; Tripodi 2007: 81–82; Zahrnt 2011: 767. Kehne 2002: 36 assumes that it is possible for provisions to have been stored not only in Therme but in bases situated in Pieria as well. Tuplin 1987a: 183 shares the opinion that food was stored in Macedonia in more than a single place: ‘perhaps Therma and (some of) the “cities” between there and the R. Axios, a region where the expedition halted for some time (id. 7,121ff.).’ See also Heinrichs, Müller 2008: 287n24: ‘Unter den Standorten für (geplante) Versorgungsdepots nennt Herodot 7,25,2 ausdrücklich “Makedonien,” ohne dies näher zu spezifizieren. Wahrscheinlich waren mehrere Plätze vorgesehen, den Xerxes’ Heer (und Flotte) legte auf dem Marsch nach Griechenland eine längere Pause im Raum