The Expulsion of the Persians from Europe

The Battle of Plataea, for the time being at least, put an end to Persian ambitions to conquer Greece. The Persians, however, were still in possession of the coastal lands between Byzantium and the mouth of the Strymon and were also in control of the Hellespont and Bosporus, which, under favourable circumstances, would provide them with the opportunity to invade Greece once more. At the time, the authority of the Great King in Europe was based on garrisons located at strategically important points such as Sestus, Doriscus, and Eion; it may be assumed as well that there were other fortified places whose names the sources do not mention. To prevent a second Persian invasion, it was important for the Greeks to establish control over the Straits and to eliminate the garrisons in question. To achieve these aims it was necessary to gain control over the Aegean Sea and to destroy the Persian navy, which was still powerful enough to defend the Persian positions in the northern Aegean. At the Battle of Mycale, the Greeks, led by the Spartan king Leutychides, succeeded in defeating the Persian force and burning their navy, which had been beached beforehand. This provided the Greeks with temporary naval superiority and the opportunity for an immediate attack on the Persian territories in Europe. It was natural for their first aim to be the region of the Hellespont, for it was this area where the pontoon-bridges used to cross over to the European coast had been joined together.

The Capture of Sestus

On the way to the Hellespont unfavourable winds forced the united Greek navy to cast anchor by Lectum. From Lectum the Greeks sailed for Abydos to find the pontoon-bridges torn apart. It turned out, then, that the chief aim of the naval operation had already been fulfilled and, accordingly, the Peloponnesians decided to return to Greece, led by Leutychides. The Athenians, however, led by Xanthippus, did not return home but instead headed for Sestus, which they laid

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1 Hdt. vii.106.1–2.
2 Ibid. ix.96.1–106.1.
3 Ibid. ix.106.4.
Their reasons for this action were likely connected to the fact that only fourteen years previously the Athenian Miltiades had exercised control over the cities of the Thracian Chersonese. The Athenians considered the peninsula their territory and decided to take advantage of the favourable circumstances to reestablish their authority there. What is more, the equipment needed for the joining of the pontoon-bridges was already in Sestus, taken there by Oeobazus of Cardia.

According to Herodotus it was only the Athenians who took up the siege of Sestus. He does not specify whether the islanders, who were probably part of the allied Greek navy, decided to stay or return home, though, as Meiggs points out, their interest would have prompted them to join the Athenians in this enterprise. The versions Thucydides and Diodorus offer are different. Thucydides claims that Sestus was attacked by the Athenians and their allies from Ionia and the Hellespont, while Diodorus mentions the Ionians and the islanders. It is understandable that the different versions have led to different suppositions by modern scholars. Regardless, whether on their own or together with their allies the Athenians sailed for Sestus. At that time, this city, as well as the neighbouring area, was ruled by Artayctes. Herodotus describes Sestus as the strongest fortress in the region and makes it clear that, at the news of the arrival of the Greeks in the Hellespont, a great number of people from the nearby cities crowded there. That fact put Artayctes in a difficult situation, for the arrival of the Greeks was unexpected to him and accordingly there were not enough provisions stored in the city to withstand a prolonged siege.

The siege proved to be a long one. The coming of autumn made the Athenian soldiers resentful and they wanted to go home. The commanders did not yield to the pressure and stated that the siege would last until the fortress fell or until

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4 Ibid. ix.114.1–2.  
5 Ibid. ix.115.1.  
6 Ibid. ix.114.2.  
7 Ibid. ix.106.4.  
8 Meiggs 1973: 35m.  
9 Thuc. i.89.2.  
10 Diod. xi.37.4–5.  
12 Hdt. ix.116.1.  
13 Ibid. ix.115.1, 116.3.  
14 Ibid. ix.117.1.