

Barbarians in Mind: The Greco-Persian Wars and the Greek Construction of the Persians



Question about Herodotus's Cosmopolitan Outlook

“Custom is
king of all.”
(Hdt. 3.38)



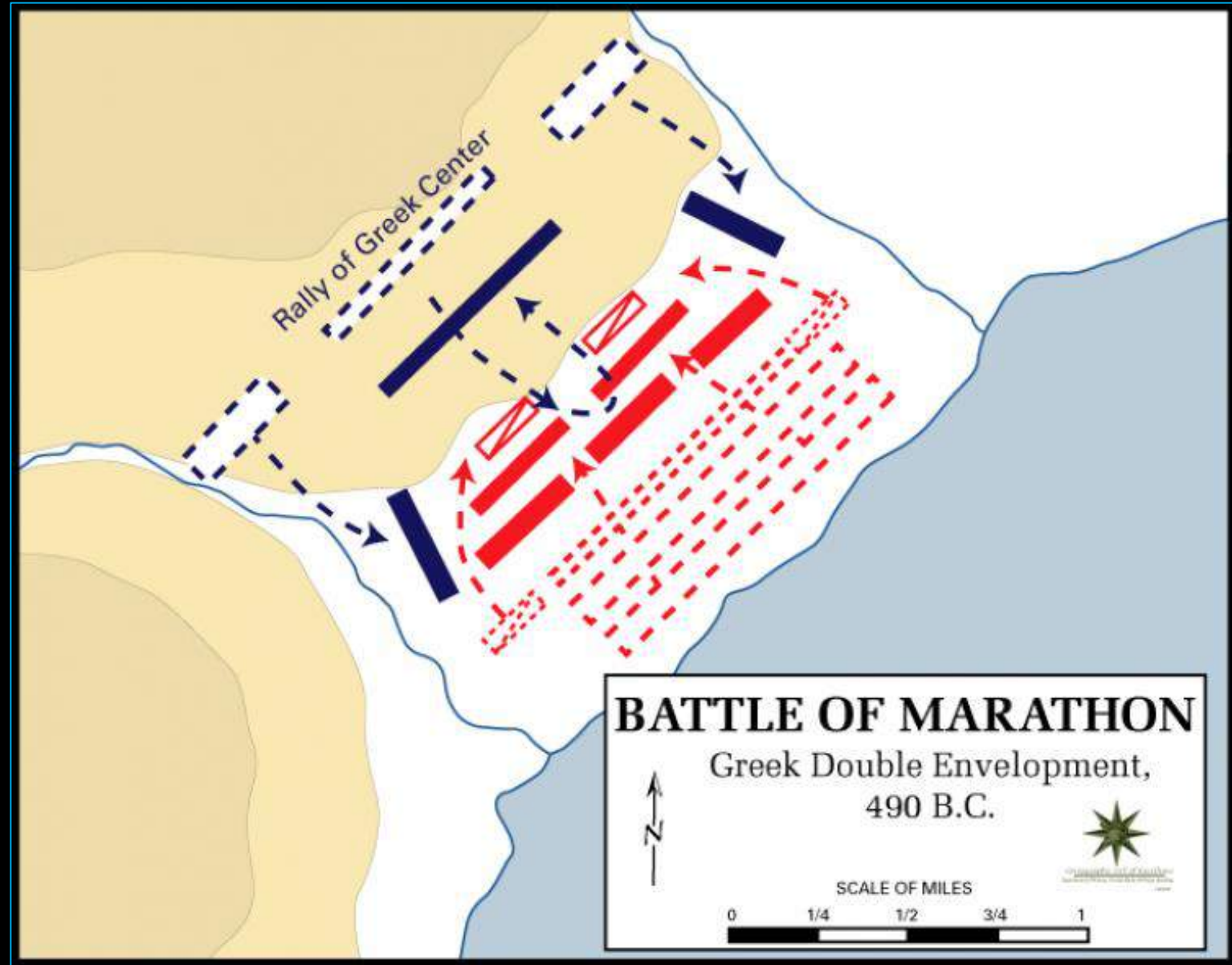
Ionian Revolt: Failure and Fallout (494 BCE)

- Persians install democracies to replace tyrants in Ionia (Western Asia Minor inhabited by Greeks)
- Again, idea of Persian tolerance: form of government in subject cities did not matter to Persia, it seems, so long as tribute was paid
- Persian expansionism would eventually mean knocking on mainland Greece's door, asking for "earth and water" (submission to Persian King)

The notion of *tisis* (requital, revenge)

- Darius's motivation of revenge against Athenian aid in the burning of the Ionian city of Sardis
- See also the opening stories in Herodotus about the reciprocal kidnapping of women → idea is one of constant back-and-forth, of revenge and requital
- *tisis* as a model for understanding much of the *Histories*

Battle of Marathon (490 BCE)





Aeschylus: “The glorious grove of
Marathon can tell of the Greeks’
valor – as can the long-haired
Mede [Persian], who well
remembers it”



King Xerxes to avenge his father Darius

- Xerxes' decision to invade, initially hesitant, before a figure in a dream tells him to do so
- Since of divine ordering, fate, tragedy → Herodotus as between myth and history
- massive march & the bridging of Asia and Europe (and its hubris?)



Xerxes: Villain or Victim? (Hdt. 7.5)

Now Xerxes at first was by no means eager to march against Greece ... But Mardonius [his cousin] was constantly introducing the subject. "Master," he would say, "it is not fitting that the Athenians after doing the Persians a great injury, escape unpunished" ... This was an argument for revenge."

Xerxes, C

(465 BCE)

The 300 Spartans

I
X

zing”
rd Said)



*and Farrar
ing Xerxes*



Allied Greek camp



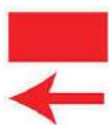
Persian camp



Hill of last stand



Allied Greeks



Persians

Phokian Wall



Towns

Gulf of Malia

Alpenoi

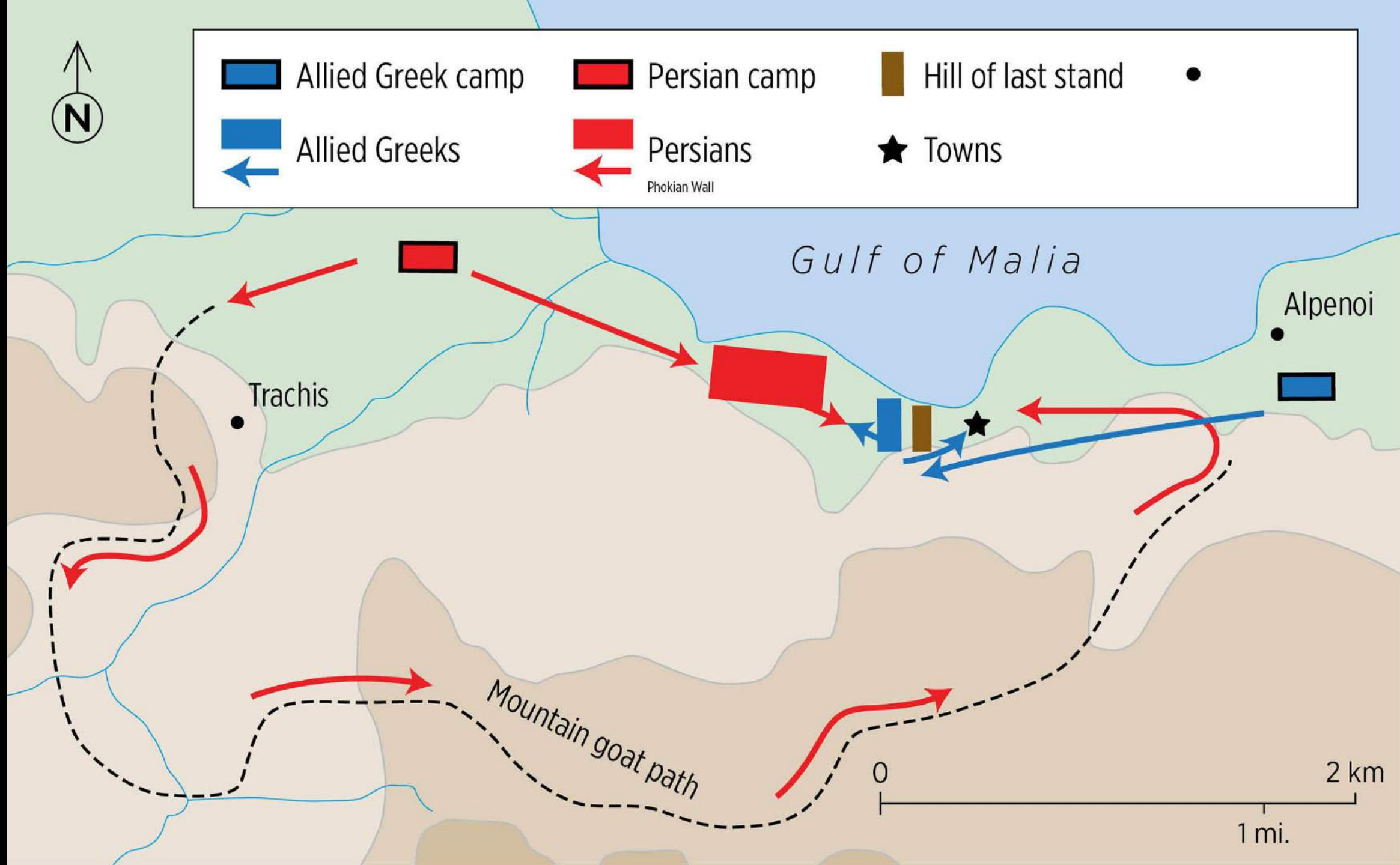
Trachis

Mountain goat path

0

2 km

1 mi.



Leonidas at Thermopylae (David, 1814)





Ω ΞΕΙΝ' ΑΓΓΕΛΛΕΙΝ ΛΑΚΕΔΑΙΜΟΝΙΟΙΣ ΟΤΙ ΤΗΔΕ
ΚΕΙΜΕΘΑ ΤΟΙΣ ΚΕΙΝΩΝ ΡΗΜΑΣΙ ΠΕΙΘΟΜΕΝΟΙ

“Thermopylae,” Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933)

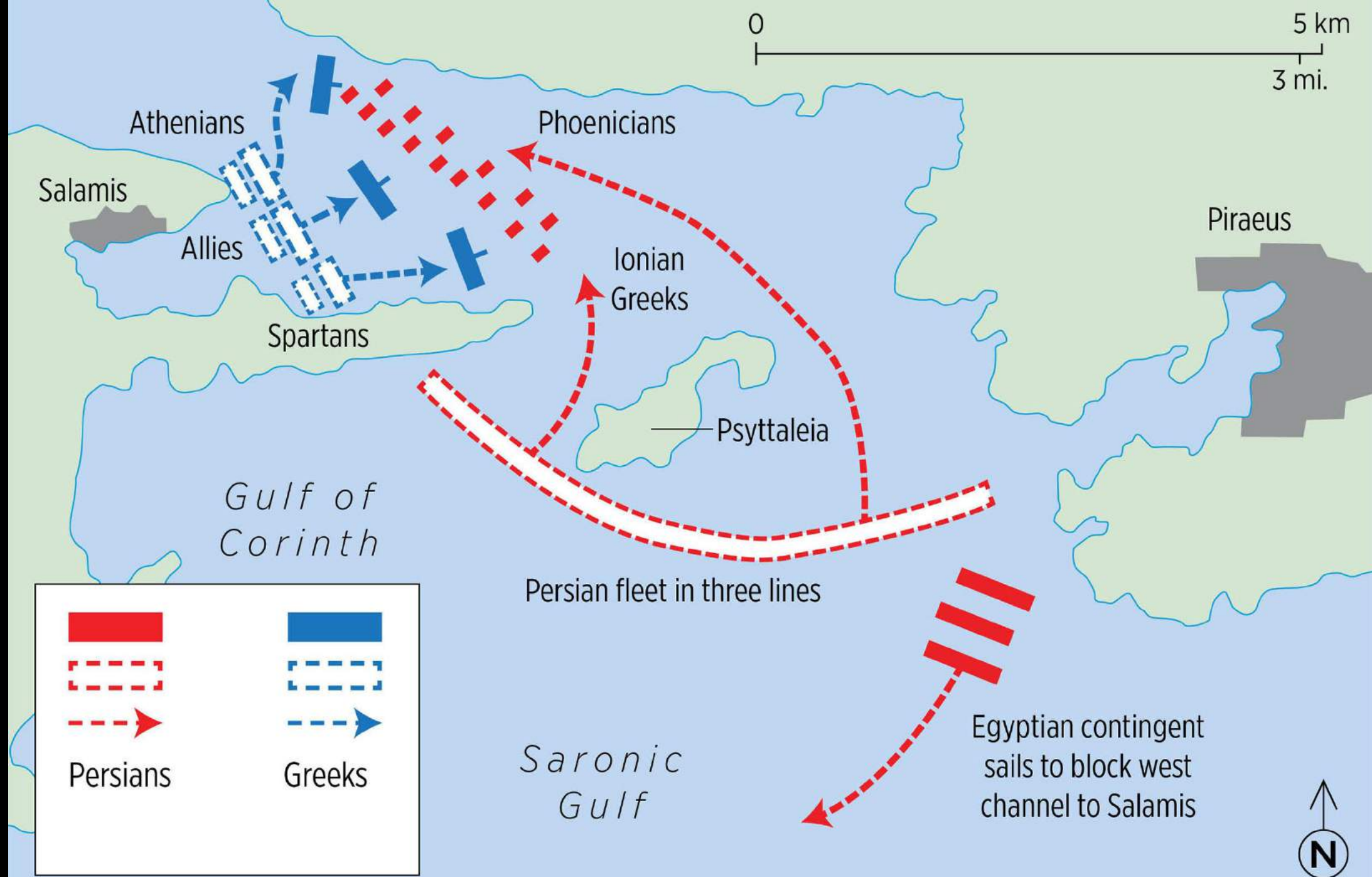
Honor to those who in their lives
are committed and guard their
Thermopylae.

Never stirring from duty;
just and upright in all their deeds,
but with pity and compassion too;
generous whenever they are rich,
and when
they are poor, again a little
generous,
again helping as much as they are
able;

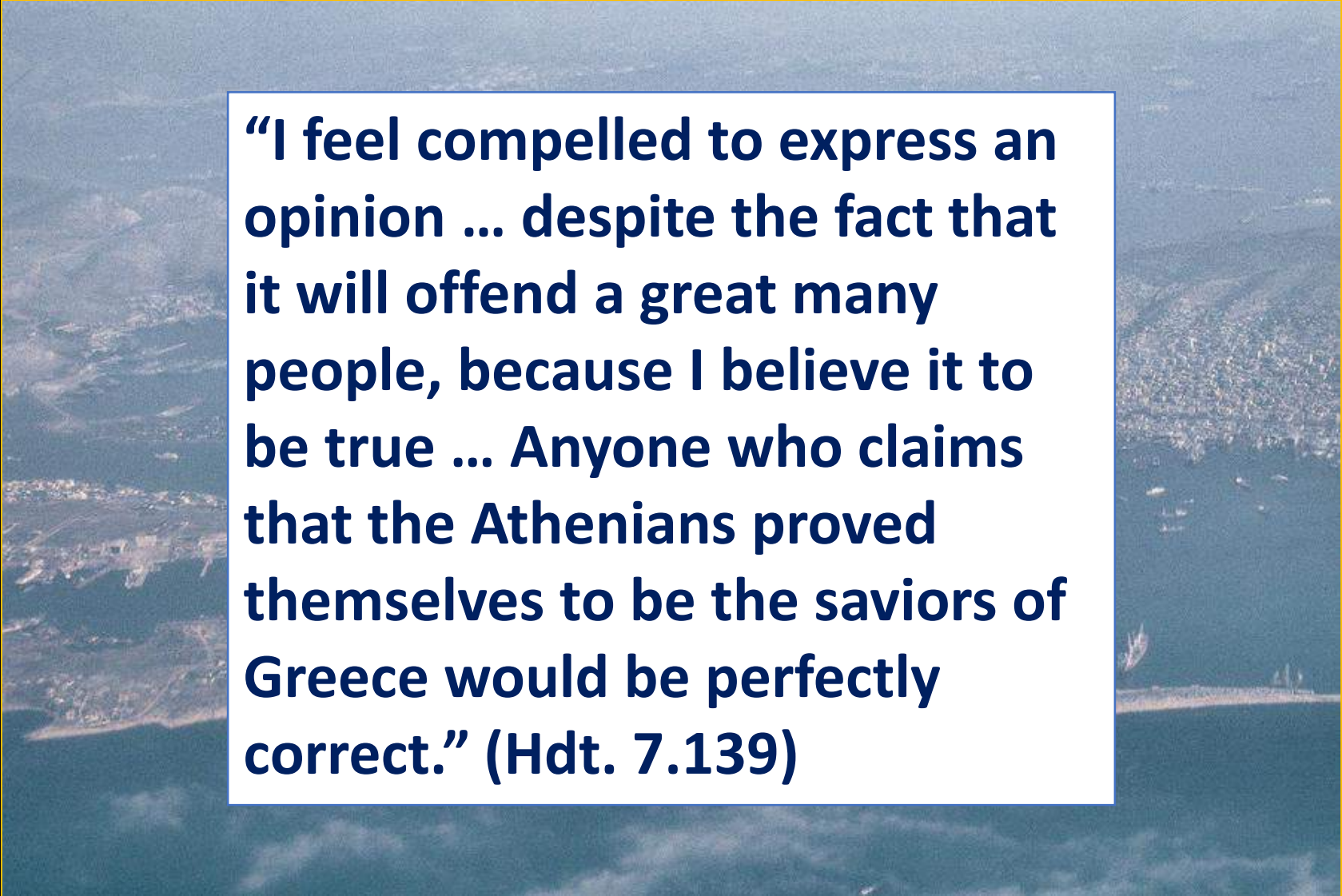
always speaking the truth,
but without rancor for those who
lie.

And they merit greater honor
when they foresee (and many do
foresee)
that Ephialtes will finally appear,
and in the end the Medes will go
through.





Herodotus on the Role of Athens

An aerial photograph of a coastal region, likely the Aegean Sea, showing a body of water in the foreground and a distant, hilly shoreline in the background. The text is overlaid on a white rectangular box in the center of the image.

“I feel compelled to express an opinion ... despite the fact that it will offend a great many people, because I believe it to be true ... Anyone who claims that the Athenians proved themselves to be the saviors of Greece would be perfectly correct.” (Hdt. 7.139)

Greek Unity: Hdt. 8.144

Athenians to Spartans: “Even if we were inclined to do so [to medize], there are plenty of important obstacles in the way. First and foremost, there is the burning and destruction of the statues and homes of our gods; rather than entering into a treaty with the perpetrator of these deeds, we are duty-bound to do our utmost to avenge them. Then again, there is the fact that **we are all Greeks – a people of one blood speaking one common language, with temples to the gods and religious sites in common, and with a common way of life.**”

Greek “Meagerness” v. Persian Riches

“The story goes that when Pausanias [the Spartan king who led the Greeks to victory at Plataea] saw all the King’s paraphernalia that had been abandoned, **fitted out with gold and silver and embroidered hangings**, he told the Persian commander’s chefs to prepare the kind of meal they had made for the Persians. They did so, and then, when he saw the gold and silver couches and their fine coverings, the gold and silver tables, and the magnificent feast, he was amazed at all the good things spread out there and, for a joke, he told his own servants to prepare a typical Spartan meal ... **‘Men of Greece, my purpose in asking you here is to show you just how foolish the Persian King is. Look at the way he lives, and then consider that he invaded our country to rob us of our meager portions.’** (Hdt. 9.82)

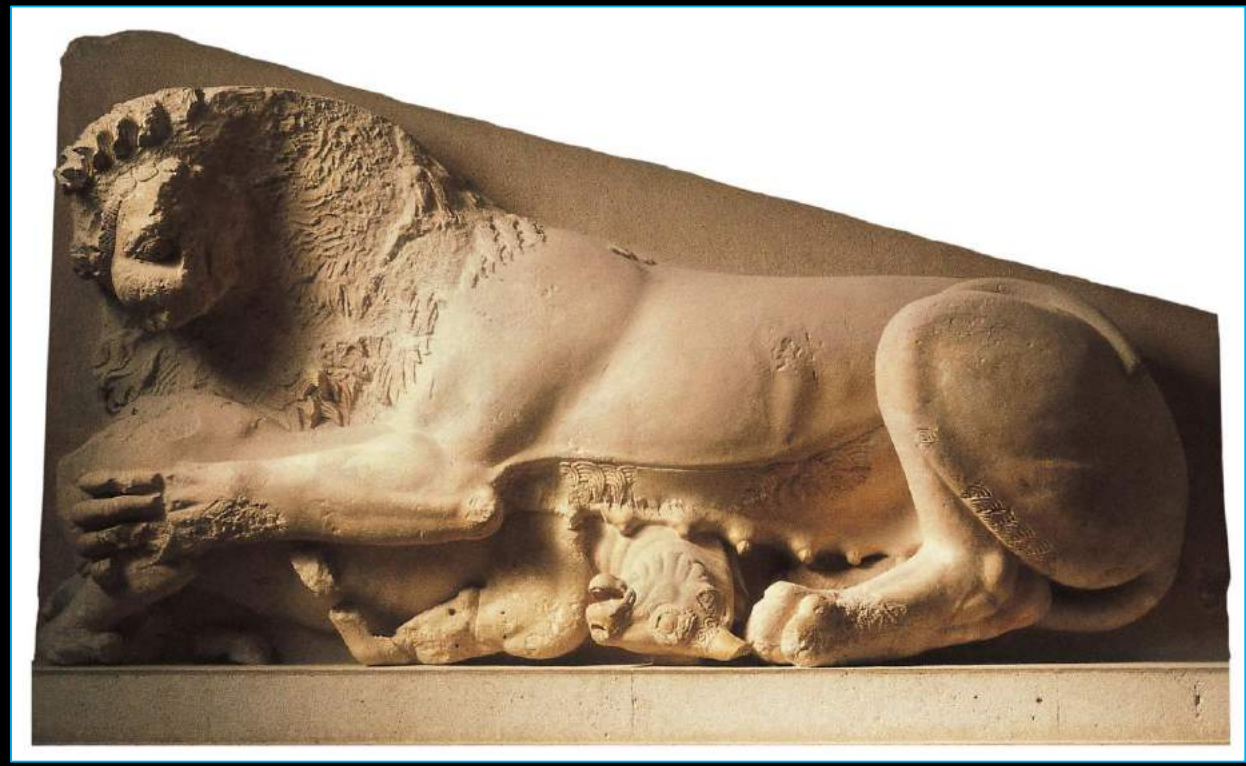
Aeschylus, *The Persians* (472 BCE)

Behold the punishment of
the Persians! Remember,
Greece and Athens! Lest
you disdain *your* present
fortune, and lust after
more,

Squandering great
prosperity ...

-- (815-827, trans.
Benardete, adapted)

“Bar Bar Bar”?





Persians and the Question of “Softness”

“Xerxes, who took this road, came upon a plane-tree so beautiful that he presented it with golden ornaments and put it under the care of his Immortals.” (Herodotus 7.31)

Handel, *Xerxes* (1738):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlByMYvjM9Y>

Plutarch (1st-2nd C CE) on Greco-Persian Wars

“At Salamis, Mycale, and Plataea they established, **as though in adamantine stone, the freedom of Greece**, and they handed it down to the rest of humankind.”

(On the Glory of the Athenians 350A)

Turning History into Myth?

