



After Thermopylae: The Oath of Plataea and the End of the Graeco-Persian Wars by Paul Cartledge.

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In *After Thermopylae*, historian Paul Cartledge (Cambridge Univ.), a leading expert on Classical and Hellenistic Sparta,¹ examines how the ancient Greeks commemorated the Battle of Plataea (479 BC), which he believes to have been *the* decisive battle of the Persian Wars (490–479 BC): a coalition of some thirty-three Greek city-states annihilated a Persian expeditionary force on the plains of southern Boeotia, permanently ending Persian attempts to annex the Greek mainland into the Achaemenid Empire.

The Spartan regent Pausanias commanded the Greek forces, among whom the Spartan contingent especially distinguished itself in the fight. This fact later proved inconvenient to the Athenians, who after the war assumed leadership of a ca. 170-member anti-Persian alliance that they soon transformed into an exploitive empire. The Athenians, unlike the Spartans, preferred to remember Marathon (490 BC) and Salamis (480 BC) as the preeminent battles of the war: both had been triumphs primarily of Athenian infantrymen and sailors, respectively.

However, Plataea was somewhat of an embarrassment to the Spartans as well. For Pausanias, a nephew of King Leonidas, who had died gloriously at Thermopylae in 480 BC, Plataea was the high point of his career, which ended when his countrymen accused him of conspiring with the Persians (!) and starved him to death. Given the tainted loyalty of Pausanias, later generations of Spartans emphasized the inspiring defeat at Thermopylae. Laconophile Cartledge² fulminates as follows in his introduction:

the classically educated Victorian political philosopher and activist John Stuart Mill was once famously moved to claim that Marathon was more important than Hastings, even as an event in English history! ... But the memory of the Persian Wars was also then, as it often still is, highly selective. Will Cinderella—the Battle of Plataea—be allowed to go to this ball? Not always, nor indeed very often.... Sadly, the register of long oblivion could easily extend back in time, as far indeed as Mill and beyond. (xi–xii).

The dubious place of Plataea in ancient Greek (and our own) historical memory is ironically evoked in the main title—*After Thermopylae*.

The book, however, only tangentially concerns the details of the battle itself, focusing instead on an inscription dedicated some 150 years later near the Temple of Ares in the Attic deme of Acharnia (a rare instance in Greece of the war-god being honored with both a temple and a cult). The text purports to record an oath sworn by soldiers of the Greek coalition at Plataea. It was likely inscribed not long after the Athenian/allied defeat by Philip II at the Battle of Chaeronea (338 BC). At the time, a pol-

1. His previous works include *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History 1300–362 BC*, 2nd ed. (NY: Routledge, 2002), *Spartan Reflections*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: U Cal Pr., 2003), *The Spartans* (NY: Overlook Pr, 2003), and *Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed the World* (NY: Overlook Pr, 2006), among many others.

2. In 2005, he was made an honorary citizen of Sparta.

icy of universal military service was being instituted. Young trainees (ephebes) spent two years on active duty patrolling the Athenian frontier. Along with the “Oath of Plataea” the same stele bears an inscription recording the ephobic oath. The critical question remains, however, “just when was the text of the Oath of Plataea composed—in 479, to be sworn before the battle, or sometime later, as an after-the-fact patriotic forgery?”

Cartledge argues vehemently that the oath does not commemorate any actual pre-battle pledge made by Athenians and Spartans. Instead, he persuasively maintains that the Greek force swore some sort of oath at Plataea, but that its text was not preserved and that the surviving inscription represents an early fourth-century Athenian attempt to co-opt a historic victory at Sparta’s expense. Though there are many plausible alternative theories about the oath—Peter Krentz, for example, thinks the Acharnia text may date to the Battle of Marathon³—Cartledge makes a good case for its inauthenticity. Certainly, the Athenians were not above blatant forgery.

A puzzling aspect of the oath is the promise to “tithe” from the spoils taken from the Thebans, who had joined the Persian cause (i.e., “Medized”). Since the Spartans and Athenians failed to capture Thebes after Plataea, the expected spoils never materialized. While other versions (in works of Athenian orators) mention the tithing of *all* Greek cities that had Medized, the inscribed text calls out Thebes in particular. This specificity may have resonated strongly after 335 BC, when Alexander the Great had indeed razed Thebes and sold its inhabitants into slavery, an event that shocked contemporaries and required justification. Thebes’ Medism nearly 150 years earlier became an obvious, if cynical, talking point. I myself think the inscribed Oath may have been an act of ideological collaboration by Athenians sympathetic to Alexander’s Persian adventure.

Despite the helmet and sword depicted on its dust cover, this volume will disappoint its publisher’s likely target audience of military history aficionados. The account of the particulars of the battle (comprising just twelve of the book’s 167 pages of main text) is competent, but uninspired, more a gloss than a detailed narrative. Questions of topography and the tactics of both sides are touched on only glancingly. Though he derides other historians’ neglect of the battle, Cartledge shows little interest in it. Granted, it is notoriously difficult to reconstruct the battle from Herodotus’s narrative, our principal source, but some recreation of the events on the ground—who fought where, when, and how well—must be the starting point for understanding both the event and any commemorations of it.

Specialists, too, will find *After Thermopylae* dissatisfying. It calls to mind an undergraduate lecture, with a remedial reading on the importance of oaths in Greek religion. In short, the book will medicate military buffs with the quinine of religion, memory studies, and epigraphy, with but a small pinch of sugar about the battle itself.

3. “The Oath of Marathon, Not Plataia?” *Hesperia* 76 (2007) 731–42.