**Document D: Rupert Matthews**

No aspect of the Thermopylae campaign has given rise to greater controversy than the size and composition of the army led by Xerxes into Greece. It is generally agreed that the army was very large by the standards of the day, though how numerous the host was is a matter of great dispute. . . .

No records have survived from the Persian Empire to help us decide just how large was the force that Xerxes had gathered at Sardis by the end of winter. Herodotus puts the strength of Xerxes’ army at around two million men and says that they drank the rivers dry as they advanced. Many historians have dismissed this as a wild exaggeration. Some have guessed that Herodotus was out by a factor of ten, a not uncommon error; but one that Herodotus does not make elsewhere. Few historians have made an attempt to produce an accurate picture of the vast force advancing towards Thermopylae.

And yet there is enough information available to come up with what may be a reasonable assessment of the size and fighting qualities of the army that marched with Xerxes. To understand what happened at Thermopylae and to set the campaign in context it is essential to understand, or attempt to understand, the capabilities of the Persian host. To do otherwise is to duck the issue.

As with so much about the Thermopylae campaign, it is best to start with Herodotus, while always bearing in mind that he wrote with hindsight and that those who gave him his information may have had reasons to add their own viewpoint. Herodotus uses the grand review held by Xerxes of his forces at Doris’s in the spring of 480BC as the setting for a dramatized account of the army and navy under the control of the King of Kings. The information that Herodotus gives about the Persian army is not simply a bald total, he lists all the subject nations that provided troops and how they were brigaded together for active service. . . .

As usual, Herodotus does not tell us where he got this information from, but it does bear all the hallmarks of being an official document of the Persian Empire. The neat rounding of all numbers is typical of the Mesopotamian bureaucracy. We know from other sources that Persian generals preferred to have units of uniform strength for logistical purposes and would group together small units to achieve this, as on Herodotus’ list. . . .

Whatever the sources of information given by Herodotus, it is quite clear that the list is not an accurate record of the army Xerxes led into Greece. It would have been physically impossible to march that many men along the roads available, and to keep them supplied. However, the document on which Herodotus based his figures cannot be simply ignored or dismissed. It is most likely to have been an official list of the *total* military forces available to Xerxes. The Persian bureaucracy would have needed such a list, and Herodotus could quite easily have obtained a copy. . . .

Quite how many of the 1.85 million men recorded by Herodotus were needed for garrison duties across the empire is unknown. Most likely it was the majority of men available for armed service. All armies suffer from natural wastage, in the form of sickness, death and desertion. The Persian army would have been no different. Added to that was the need to allow for units to be in transit, repairing fortifications and other tasks. . . .

On route from Sardis to Greece, the Persian army marched up what is now known as the Gallipoli peninsula. The British World War I commander, Major-General Sir Frederick Barton Maurice (187-1951) had occasion to study the water supply of the Gallipoli peninsula. He estimated that in spring and summer, the season when Xerxes marched through, the area could provide enough water to supply an army of 210,000 men, together with the pack animals and horses needed to move their supplies.

This brings us to the famous statement, often dismissed at the end, that the Persian army drank the rivers dry as they advanced. In the summer months the rivers of Thrace, Macedonia and northern Greece are often little more than streams as the rainfall declines. We know that Xerxes sent an advance guard of labourers and engineers forward to prepare the route for his invasion. Thrace was already within the empire, but King Alexander II of Macedonia was compelled to assist and supply these workmen as a sign of his friendship to the Persian Empire.

While it is not recorded exactly what these men did, it is clear that they were undertaking construction work that would aid the army. Mending and improving roads would be an obvious task to be tackled, but so too would be the preparation of food and water supplies. If streams were dammed to create reservoirs of water, it could be quite literally true that the advancing army ensured that the riverbeds were dry where they entered the sea. And it must be remembered that the swift Greek galleys would have been taking every opportunity to scout out the Persian army from off the coast. From their ships, the Greeks would have seen the empty rivers and taken note.

By preparing water supplies in this way, Xerxes would have been able to move an army considerably larger than the 210,000 men that General Maurice thought the land could support. Even so, it is unlikely that the increase would have been more than around 50%, say a total of 300,000 to 350,000.

***Source:*** *Rupert Matthews,* The Battle of Thermopylae: A Campaign in Context*, 2006.*