

Latro and the Persian army

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 13 Jun 2003

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Chris — 13 Jun 2003, 17:50

I've finally finished reading Herodotus this week, which was rewarding in and of itself, but somehow I couldn't help but keep my eye out for things concerning those historical characters which also appeared in Latro's story. And while this hasn't exactly inspired me to construct any bizarre theories about the story, there was one thing that struck me as curious that I wondered if anyone had an "obvious" explanation for.

Essentially, the assumption I made from the story is that Latro's injury and his offense to Demeter occurred during the battle of Plataea. Having read Herodotus' vague description of the action there, however, he provides some specifics that make this difficult to reconcile. The Greek army had split into two divisions, according to his account - the Spartans, who were engaged near the shrine of Demeter, and the Athenians who were some distance away. The Persian army also split, and it's stated that native Persians led by Mardonius pursued the Spartans, while the foreign contingent coming along after fought the Athenians & co. This implies that for Latro to have been fighting near the shrine of Demeter during the battle of Plataea, he must have been in the Persian contingent; not only that, he would have to have been in the leading elements among the Immortals and Mardonius' hand-picked bodyguard, since the rout began before the full Persian contingent was able to engage.

It's not impossible to resolve this, but it does seem to make a difference how you choose to explain it.

One of the first things that occurred to me was that Latro may have acquired his curse at a different shrine of Demeter - the Persians had sacked the one at Eleusis earlier, whereas at Plataea the shrine remained supposedly untouched. If this were the case then Latro may have lost his memory quite some time before the battle of Plataea where he received his head injury (which would then be incidental and misleading).

Another possibility is that Latro may really have been close to Mardonius. It doesn't seem unreasonable that he would be accorded some honor if he really was the one to kill Leonidas. And Latro's vague memory places him somewhere not too far away from Xerxes during the battle of Thermopylae, so perhaps he had a position of honor even back then. That, however, makes him a prominent enough figure that it seems unusual that no one thought to mention him in the various histories.

Any thoughts?

Chris

"Indeed it is hard to grasp why it hasn't already given birth... to its hero, that demon who will stage without scruple that horrifying play that reduces the whole age to laughter and to unconsciousness of the fact that it is laughing at itself." -- Soren Kierkegaard

A. Bin Talal — 14 Jun 2003, 18:06 · follows Chris

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You are saying then that he was cursed by Demeter to forget before the battle and then took part in the battle, fighting the Athenians, and got a head injury! it's a nice theory but I don't see any hints in the text of 'Latro' to this conclusion. Any way he seemed almost invincible for the rest of the book having Nike following him everywhere like a newly married wife following her husband.

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Chris

Well in the History there was no mention of a Roman or even a Latin contingent in the Persian army, let alone a single Roman man. IMHO I think that Latro foreshadows the rise of the Roman republic which was created around the time of the Persian war. Nike followed them everywhere around the Hellenic world; just like Latro.

The Wynns — 16 Jun 2003, 00:21 · follows A. Bin Talal

Chris postulates:

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Crush responds:

You have solved the puzzle yourself. Latro was an Immortal -- probably an officer among them on a tactical level. He could be merely an officer in the Persian military, but it is unlikely that a foreigner would be permitted such a distinction. Foreigners were, however, preferred among bodyguard units as they considered less corruptible (Wolfe himself states in the introduction) -- consider Rome's Praetorian Guard. How this particular Latin won a place with the Immortals is not explained, but Latro's knowledge of Zoroastrianism strongly suggests he spent some significant time in Persia (as opposed to being mustered in Egypt which the text suggests he went to first). I don't believe any of the Immortals were mentioned in Herodotus by name.

The quote from Herodotus at the beginning of SotM is from the battle of Plataea when Mardonius was killed. I would think this is where the story begins.

-- Crush

Andrew Bollen — 16 Jun 2003, 00:08 · follows The Wynns

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Doesn't this get kind of explained in Latro's vision at Thermopylae? I don't have time to search out the quote, but as I recall, we learn from this that Latro is captain of a group of Romans, which has been given a position of honor near the King, in the absence for whatever reason of the Immortals. They front the desperate charge by Leonidas' band; I think we can probably infer that Latro personally slays Leonidas.

It's not a stretch to imagine Mardonius granting the Romans an Immortals-like position on the field at Plataea, given this.