



IMMORTALS

IMMORTALS (Gk. *athánatoi*), name of a corps of 10,000 Persian élite infantry soldiers in Herodotus (7.83.1, 211.1; 8.113.2). The later attestations in Athenaios (q.v.), *Deipnosophistai* 12.514c (who is quoting Heracleides of Cumae); Hesychius, *Lexicon* s.v. (with the erroneous definition as a “cavalry detachment”); Procopius (1.14.31); and other sources obviously derive from Herodotus’s usage, whereas Dio Cassius (52.27.1) used *athánatoi*, with reference to Rome, for a standing army (FIGURE 1).

All three passages of Herodotus are in connection with Xerxes’ campaign against Greece in 480–479 B.C.E. After having enumerated the generals of the six main corps of the Persian infantry (termed *stratoû toû pezoû*, 7.82), the historian mentions lastly, and as though in addition, Hydarnes (q.v., OPers. Vidr̥na-), son of Hydarnes (the father evidently being identical with one of the six helpers of Darius against Gaumata in 522 B.C.E.), as the leader of the 10,000 select Persian troops called “the Immortals” (7.83.1). He continues, explaining this name with the following words: “When any one of them left the number incomplete, whether by force of death or of sickness, a substitute was appointed, so that they never were more or less than 10,000 men.” That the following information (7.83.2) on the “Persians” and all their gold jewelry, the carriages with their concubines, the large domestic staff, and the separate food transport is especially in regard to those Immortals, is in my opinion not clear from Herodotus’s words.

The Immortals played a particular part in the fighting at the pass of Thermopylae (see Hignett, pp. 143 ff., 361 ff.). There those Persians were



brought into action (7.211.1) “whom the King called the Immortals and the leader of whom was Hydarnes,” but without success at the pass itself, until they turned the Spartans’ position by use of a mountain path called Anopaia, thanks to an act of betrayal by a local resident, Ephialtes.

As Xerxes began his withdrawal after the Persian defeat at Salamis, Mardonius, in order to continue the campaign in the following spring, chose first “all the so-called Immortals, without their leader Hydarnes, for he did not want to leave the king” (8.113.2). However, since the Immortals are never mentioned in connection with the operations of the year 479 B.C.E., it is quite probable that they returned to Asia together with Hydarnes and the king (as his bodyguard) and that the information given by Herodotus is simply wrong (cf. Hignett, p. 267).

Although the word *athánatoi* is not used in Herodotus (7.41.1), everybody is in agreement that this Persian (rather Iranian or simply royal) élite corps is alluded to in the description of the Persian army’s march from Sardis to the Hellespont. Among the troops following Xerxes there are mentioned “10,000 foot soldiers, chosen from the rest of the Persians” (7.41.1); “1,000 of them had spears with golden pomegranates at the lower end; they encircled the others all around, and the 9,000 on the inside of them had silver pomegranates” (7.41.2). Not only this account, which lists several other units of 1,000 or 10,000 men, but also some other reports found in Greek sources are somewhat confused, so that not every corps of 10,000 élite soldiers mentioned by some Greek author must be identified with the Immortals without hesitation.

The enumeration of the commanders-in-chief in Herodotus 7.82-83 may suggest that the Immortals stood outside the ordinary, elaborate decimal organization of the Persian army into units and sub-units of tens, hundreds, thousands, and myriads; but the fact that Herodotus expressly emphasized that “they were always kept at full strength indicates that the decimal organization was merely nominal in the rest of the infantry, at least for the larger units” (Hignett, p. 42). Moreover, whereas the names of the smaller units seem to be attested in the Elamite tablets (El. *da-sa-ba-um* = OPers. **daθa-ba* [?] “decury,” El. *sa-da-ba-um* = OPers. **θata-ba-* [?] “century”), those of the larger regiments are not known. Reconstructing **baivarabam* for the division of 10,000 men (thus Sekunda, p. 5) is mere speculation, as is the reconstruction of **Amrtaka* for the Immortals (ibid., p. 6). Also it is only conjecture to reconstruct the title of the commander of such a myriad as OIr. **baivar-pati-* “chief of 10,000,” even on the basis of Gk. *myriárchēs* (Herodotus, 7.81).



Time and again scholars have presumed (see, e.g., the vivid description by Olmstead, pp. 238 f.), that the royal guards represented on glazed bricks at Susa and on stone reliefs at Persepolis were part of the 10,000 Immortals; but this is far from being proven, in spite of their Persian clothing at Susa.

Thus all the essential questions concerning this special corps—its origin (the assumption of successive enlargements of a much smaller group is rightly rejected by Gnoli, pp. 270 ff.), their exact tasks, and even their Iranian name—cannot be solved, because authentic sources are missing. As to the name, Pagliaro (firstly, 1943, p. 38; in detail, 1954, pp. 146-51) was of the opinion that Herodotus (or rather his interpreter or informant) committed a mistranslation of the Iranian name, which in Pagliaro's view was OPers. *anušiya-* “follower” (plausibly to be derived only from IIr. **ánu-tya-* “being behind”), by confusing or associating it with the phonetically similar OIr. **anauša* (= Av. *anaoša-*) “immortal.” However, there are weighty reservations about such an interpretation, especially with regard to the transferred use of *athánatos* for humans instead of gods in Herodotus (a usage which is not genuinely Greek) or the specialized use of OPers. *anušiya-*, the usual sense of which is difficult to reconcile with the name of a division of 1,000 or even 10,000 men (see Gnoli, pp. 270 ff.). The problem persists even if one does not take *athánatos* literally and sees it, rather, as the reflex of the idea of immortality so characteristic of a military society (Gnoli, p. 280).

Not undisputed is the interpretation of Herodotus 7.31, a passage which leads into an entirely different context: Somewhere in Lydia, Xerxes is said to have appointed a man—thus in an unbiased translation—to be “immortal custodian” (i.e., to be replaced in case of loss) of a plane-tree adorned by the king with gold for its beauty. Other scholars, linking the words another way, think of “an immortal man,” who is (wrongly, I would say) supposed to be “one of the Immortals,” detailed off as the custodian (this being resolutely stated by Briant, pp. 246 ff.).

BIBLIOGRAPHY



P. Briant, *Histoire de l'empire perse: De Cyrus à Alexandre*, Paris, 1996.

Gh. Gnoli, "Antico-persiano *anušya-* [sic] e gli immortali di Erodoto," in J. Duchesne-Guillemin and P. Lecoq, eds., *Monumentum Georg Morgenstierne I*, Acta Iranica 21, Leiden, 1981, pp. 266-80.

C. Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece*, Oxford, 1963.

A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, Chicago, 1948.

A. Pagliaro, "Fortuna di parole iraniche in occidente," *Asiatica* 9, 1943, pp. 36-42.

Idem, "Riflessi di etimologie iraniche nella tradizione storiografica greca," *Rendiconti dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Classe di Scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, 8th series, vol. 9, 1954, pp. 133-53.

N. Sekunda, *The Persian Army 560-330 BC*, London, 1992.