

## GREEK PERSPECTIVES: ACTS OF HUBRIS?

## MORE INFORMATION

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Xerxes' invasion of Greece involved two large-scale engineering projects: the pontoon bridge across the Hellespont to march the army into Europe; and the canal dug across the Mt Athos Peninsula so that the navy could avoid sailing around the treacherous peninsula. Some Greek perspectives on these projects are provided in the sources below.

Xerxes' first attempt to bridge the Hellespont was unsuccessful. In Source 1, Herodotus tells us how Xerxes responded (according to Herodotus' sources).

HERODOTUS ON XERXES' FIRST ATTEMPT  
TO BRIDGE THE HELLESPONT

But no sooner had the strait been bridged than a great storm swept down, breaking and scattering everything.

When Xerxes heard of this, he was very angry and commanded that the Hellespont be whipped with three hundred lashes, and a pair of fetters be thrown into the sea. I have even heard that he sent branders with them to brand the Hellespont. He commanded them while they whipped to utter words outlandish and presumptuous, "Bitter water, our master thus punishes you, because you did him wrong though he had done you none. Xerxes the king will pass over you, whether you want it or not; in accordance with justice no one offers you sacrifice, for you are a turbid and briny river." He commanded that the sea receive these punishments and that the overseers of the bridge over the Hellespont be beheaded.

## SOURCE 1

*Herodotus, The Histories 7.34-35, trans. A. D. Godley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).*

A second attempt to bridge the Hellespont was successful. Source 2 is from a play written by the Athenian Aeschylus. In this play, Aeschylus portrays the ghost of the Persian King Darius reflecting on the bridging of the Hellespont.

DARIUS IN AESCHYLUS' *THE PERSIANS* ON THE BRIDGE

He [Xerxes] hoped to stem that holy stream, the Bosphorus,  
And bind the Hellespont with fetters like a slave;  
He would wrest Nature, turn sea into land, manacle  
A strait with iron, to make a highway for his troops.  
He in his mortal folly thought to overpower  
Immortal gods, even Poseidon. Was this not  
Some madness that possessed him?

## SOURCE 2

*Aeschylus, The Persians 744-750 in Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound, The Suppliant, Seven Against Thebes, The Persians, trans. Philip Vellacott (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1961).*

In Source 3, Herodotus expresses his opinion on the canal through the Mt Athos Peninsula.

## HERODOTUS ON XERXES' CANAL

As far as I can judge by conjecture, Xerxes gave the command for this digging [of the canal] out of pride, wishing to display his power and leave a memorial; with no trouble they could have drawn their ships across the isthmus, yet he ordered them to dig a canal from sea to sea, wide enough to float two triremes rowed abreast.

## SOURCE 3

*Herodotus, The Histories 7.24, trans. A. D. Godley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).*

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**SOURCES AS EVIDENCE**

Using Sources 1–3 and your own knowledge, respond to the following:

1. Sources 1 and 2 depict Xerxes as disrespecting the gods through his actions. From a Greek perspective, what implications might such an attitude have for the outcomes of Xerxes' campaign?

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2. Which god is Xerxes seen to challenge in Source 2? Why is this a 'folly'?

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3. In Source 3, Herodotus suggests that Xerxes' canal was a way to show off. Might this also be a reasonable explanation for the bridge across the Hellespont?

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4. How realistic do you think these interpretations of Xerxes' character are? Can you think of other motivations that may have inspired these works? What biases might the Greek authors have towards Xerxes?

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