

Thermopylae:  
Compromise To Win The Conflict

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Historical Paper

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The year is 498 B.C. The Ionians, settlers in present day Turkey, are dissatisfied with the rule of Persian tyrants. And with the aid of troops from Athens and Eretria, they march on the Persian city of Sardis and burn it to the ground. The Persian King, Darius, vows to punish them for this aid. He also decides Greece is a threat to his empire and begins to plan a massive expedition against them. This begins a nearly 50 year long conflict known as the Persian Wars. In 480 B.C, The Greek defeat at Thermopylae, including a final stand by Leonidas I and other Greeks, showed the superiority of Greek weapons, armor, and training, bought time for United Greece to muster a larger force, and inspired the Hellene defenders to keep resisting the Barbarian<sup>1</sup>. This led to decisive victories for the Greeks at Salamis and Plataea, as well as the eventual victory in the Persian Wars, preserving the idea of democracy and laying a foundation for western civilization.

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<sup>1</sup> King Xerxes is often referred to as The Persian, The Barbarian, or The Mede

## Second Persian Invasion of Greece

After his first failure to conquer Greece at Marathon in 490, Darius began raising another huge army to subjugate Hellas once and for all. Then, in 486, his Egyptian subjects revolted. While preparing to march on them, Darius died. His son, Xerxes, became King. He crushed the Egyptians quickly. His thoughts then turned to Greece:

“It is my intent to bridge the Hellespont and lead my army through Europe to Hellas, so I may punish the Athenians for what they have done to the Persians and to my father. You saw that Darius my father was set on making an expedition against these men. But he is dead, and it was not granted him to punish them. On his behalf and that of all the Persians, I will never rest until I have taken Athens and burnt it, for the unprovoked wrong<sup>2</sup> that its people did to my father and me.”<sup>3</sup> Xerxes continued his father’s preparation for the invasion of Hellas, mustering a colossal force from all corners of the empire. It took nearly 4 years to assemble the army and navy. A topic of debate between modern historians is how many men. Herodotus<sup>4</sup> gives a number of 2.5

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<sup>2</sup> Assisting the Ionians in burning Sardis

<sup>3</sup> Herodotus 7.8B.1-2

<sup>4</sup> An Early Greek Historian, Main source

Million, and that could be doubled for the support troops<sup>5</sup> Obvious hyperbole, but the force was still massive. A consensus is hard to come by, but the Greeks were heavily outnumbered. The Persian fleet was also gargantuan. Herodotus states 1,207 ships,<sup>6</sup> a number recognized to be realistic, that just being the triremes<sup>7</sup>. There were also supply and transport ships. However the overall number was most likely lower by the Battle of Salamis. Beginning in Spring of 480, This force crossed the Hellespont, marched basically unopposed through Thrace and Macedonia. An army of 10,000 Spartans and Athenians were sent to stop Xerxes' march at the Vale of Tempe<sup>8</sup>, but withdrew after being warned by Alexander of Macedon that the Persian army was huge, and that the valley could be bypassed. His motive for doing this had little to do with ideals or nationalism, rather: "the prospect of Xerxes' army being held up indefinitely in Macedonia, a plague of human locusts stripping the granaries bare, decimating herds and flocks."<sup>9</sup>

### Thermopylae

The plan, concocted by the Athenian politician Themistocles, was to simultaneously bar the Thermopylae<sup>10</sup> pass on land, and the straits of Artemisium by sea. Thermopylae, also called Plyae, or narrows, was<sup>11</sup> a narrow coastal passage. At its narrowest point, in the period of time the battle was fought at least, would have been less than 100 meters

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<sup>5</sup> Herodotus 7.186

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus 7.184

<sup>7</sup> A war galley with 3 banks of oars; often equipped with a ram

<sup>8</sup> A gorge in Northern Thessaly

<sup>9</sup> The Greco-Persian Wars Pg. 87

<sup>10</sup> The only route into Thessaly large enough for Xerxes force

<sup>11</sup> The shoreline has advanced over time due to sedimentary disposition

wide. The Greek Fleet took up position at the Northern end of Euboea, and a small army of Peloponnese and other Greeks prepared to block the narrows. They numbered around 8,000. Led by Leonidas, one of the Kings of Sparta, accompanied by his elite bodyguard of 300. In addition to being extremely brave, strong, and patriotic, each had to have a born son. "For the Thermopylae 300 were to be in effect a suicide squad, of a peculiarly Spartan kind"<sup>12</sup> They needed sons to carry on their name. These men were sent to die. The concept of voluntary martyrdom today is exhibited in extremist groups, although a better example, by no means exact, is the Japanese kamikaze pilots of World War 2. "These share with Thermopylae action the motivation of an overriding commitment and loyalty to the good and the absolute overriding dictates of the state" In the Japanese case, the God Emperor. In the case of the Greeks, Spartan law: "that they must never flee from the battle before any multitude of men, but must abide at their post and there conquer or die."<sup>13</sup> The Spartans were free, but not entirely free. The Law was their master, and they feared it more than Xerxes' men feared him. "For most westerners the point of war is to win-and survive. Western philosophy teaches by and large how to live, not how to die. But a key element of the Spartans' world outlook was acculturation of the males from a young age to the expectation of a non-natural, early death; their whole society was shaped so as to enable them to cope with this." The Spartans did not fight to "survive." They did not fight hoping to come back alive. They fought to conquer, or die. In Spartan culture, there were only 2 types of people who received gravestones. Men who died on the battlefield

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<sup>12</sup> Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed The World Pg. 129

<sup>13</sup> Herodotus 7.104

had a simple headstone labeled "In War." The others were women who died in childbirth. It is not known whether their headstones were labeled, but it is curious that the only people who received gravestones in Sparta were fallen warriors, and those who died producing them. Sometime before or during the battle, a local villager claimed the Persians were so numerous when they fired their arrows, the sun would be blotted out. A Spartan fired back: "Good. Then we will have our battle in the shade." Leonidas only marched with 300 because the annual festival of Carneia was going on<sup>14</sup> And Sparta's army could not go to war during the festival. This is the compromise. Although, this also may be due to Sparta's reluctance to commit precious hoplites in addition to a King so far North.

### The Battle

Before Xerxes' host reached the Hot Gates, it is said that because of an Oracle, the Athenians invoked the North Wind, Boreas, to destroy the Barbarians while they lay at anchor. "They say that at the very least no fewer than 400 ships were destroyed in this labor, along with innumerable men and abundant wealth."<sup>15</sup> Sometime before the battle someone said, 'Leonidas, are you here to take such a hazardous risk with so few men against so many?' he said, 'If you men think that I rely on numbers, then all Greece is not sufficient, for it is but a small fraction of their numbers; but if on men's valour, then this number will do.'<sup>16</sup> The Greek's were defending their home. Not fighting on the

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<sup>14</sup> A festival to Honor Apollo, held in September

<sup>15</sup> Herodotus 7.190

<sup>16</sup> Plutarch *Apophthegmata Laconica* 51

whim of some half cracked God-King, who had to whip his soldiers to get them to march. Although, this may be Greek propaganda. When Xerxes' force arrived at Thermopylae, he expected the combined Greek forces to disperse. He waited 4 days growing more and more impatient. During this time, a Persian Spy witnessed the Lacedaemonians combing their long hair and doing gymnastics. They were preparing to kill or be killed. Xerxes found this laughable.<sup>17</sup> A council of War was held between Leonidas and the other contingents. It was decided they would stand and fight, Hoping reinforcements would arrive. Sometime before or during the battle, Xerxes bid "Send me thy arms." Leonidas replied "Come and take them."<sup>18</sup> It is ironic how the Spartans, the least free of all Greeks, would be the ones to stand for her freedom. On the 5th day, Xerxes sent the Medes to fight, bidding them to bring him the Spartans alive. They fell by the hundreds. Their wicker shields and light armour were no match for the long spears of a Greek Phalanx. "It is said that during these assaults in the battle the king, as he watched, jumped up three times from the throne in fear for his army."<sup>19</sup> While the Medes were unsuccessful, Xerxes called upon his elite bodyguard, The Immortals. Named such for their number was always 10,000. If one died or retired, another rose to take his place. They fared no better than the Medes. In this narrow corridor, numbers count for nothing. The Spartans would use a tactic where they feigned retreat, turning their backs and running. The barbarians would chase after, seemingly victorious, and the

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<sup>17</sup> Herodotus 7.208-209

<sup>18</sup> Plutarch *Apophthegmata Laconica* 51

<sup>19</sup> Herodotus 7.212

Lacedaemonians would turn to face them, killing an innumerable amount. The Spartans... The Spartans fought like men possessed. They, were doing what they were trained to do. What they were bred to do. What they were born to do. The next day, assuming the Greeks would be disabled by wounds and exhaustion, the Persians attacked again. The defenders of Hellas “Stood in ordered ranks by nation”<sup>20</sup>. They fought until the sun went down. The Persians, having no more success than the previous day, withdrew. Xerxes was at a loss. His army could not stay here much longer, or they would run out of food. “What Xerxes had not anticipated was that the Greeks held the tactical advantage at Thermopylae. The tight battlefield nullified the Persians' numerical preponderance, and it also prevented them from fighting the way they had been trained. Persian boys, it was said, were taught only three things: to ride, to tell the truth and to use the bow. There was no place for cavalry at Thermopylae and, even more critical, no place to volley arrows.”<sup>21</sup> They were at a distinct disadvantage, even with their massive advantage. It was during this time, Ephialtes, whose name literally means “Nightmare” came forth, hoping to earn a great reward from the king. He told Xerxes of the goat path leading over the mountains to behind Leonidas. In doing this he caused the destruction of the Lacedaemonians. Ephialtes proceeded to guide a force of immortals along the Anopaea Pass, outflanking the Greeks and effectively ending the battle. It is during this time that Leonidas ordered his soldiers to “eat their breakfast as if they were to eat their dinner in the other world.” Because they were all going to hell. The Phocians posted to defend the mountain path were scattered without

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<sup>20</sup> Herodotus 7.212

<sup>21</sup> Military History, Jan/Feb 2006, Vol. 22 Issue 10, p38



a fight. Greek deserters told Leonidas what had happened. A council of war was held, and the King sent the others away. But he and the other Spartans stayed. There are a variety of possible reasons Leonidas decided to stay and fight. After the war broke out, the Spartans consulted an Oracle. "For you, inhabitants of wide-wayed Sparta, Either your great and glorious city must be wasted by Persian men, Or if not that, then the bound of Lacedaemon must mourn a dead king, from Heracles' line."<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Leonidas went to the Hot Gates intending to fulfill this prophecy. Perhaps not. A more logical explanation is to cover the Greek retreat. Had Leonidas and his men not died, not bought enough time for the other Greeks, the defenders of Hellas would have been slaughtered by the faster Persian cavalry. Instead, they lived to fight, and die, another day. After the King dismissed the other warriors, only he, the remaining members of his 300, around 700 hundred Thespians, who would not abandon the Spartans, and 400 Thebans, who Herodotus claims Leonidas held as hostages<sup>23</sup> although this may or may not be true. Knowing they were going to die, Leonidas and his fellow soldiers advanced out farther into the pass than before, ready to kill and be killed. Herodotus claims here that the Persian company leaders drove their men with whips<sup>24</sup> but this might be his Pro-Greek side showing. Many Persians were pushed into the Aegean, and more were literally trampled alive. When the Spartans' spears broke they fought with their short swords. During this conflict, Leonidas fell. There was a great struggle over his body, but the Hellenes managed to retrieve it<sup>25</sup> When the immortals with Ephialtes arrived, the

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<sup>22</sup> Herodotus 7.220

<sup>23</sup> Herodotus 7.222

<sup>24</sup> Herodotus 7.223

<sup>25</sup> Leonidas' body was brought back and buried in Sparta in 440. A column bearing the names of the 300 was erected upon it.

remaining Greeks took position on a small hill at the mouth of the pass<sup>26</sup> and Once their swords broke the Greeks fought with hands and even teeth, defending to the last breath until the Barbarians buried them with arrows. After these events, The fleet at Artemisium retreated to the island of Salamis. After all, they had nothing left to defend. The importance of all this isn't about who won the battle. This was a Persian Victory in every sense. A King of Sparta and 300 of his best men were dead. Xerxes now had secured a route into Thessaly. Greek morale should have been crushed. But the opposite was true. Greece had her martyrs now. This battle also showed the superiority of Greek tactics and equipment, and, as Herodotus cheekily remarks: "that among so many people there were few real men." referring to the Persians. It is said that the combined Greek forces killed 20,000 of Xerxes men. So many, the king insisted on hiding or burying many before his remaining forces could advance through the pass, as not to demoralize them. But the most important thing this battle did was to inspire the Greek defenders to stand and fight. It bought time to assemble a larger force at Plataea, and drive the Persians out of Greece. It created legends out of the Spartans, especially Leonidas. The famous epitaph, by Simonides of Ceos, honors these men "*Go tell the Spartans, Passerby, That Here, Obedient To Their Laws, We lie.*" This is not to say the Spartans are responsible for saving Hellas. That is not the truth. It was the Athenians. Without their naval support, Leonidas would have been outflanked, there would be no Salamis, and no Western civilization as we know it. Yes, there may be Western civilization, but a skewed, Persian kind. The Greco-Persian wars reaches all the way to

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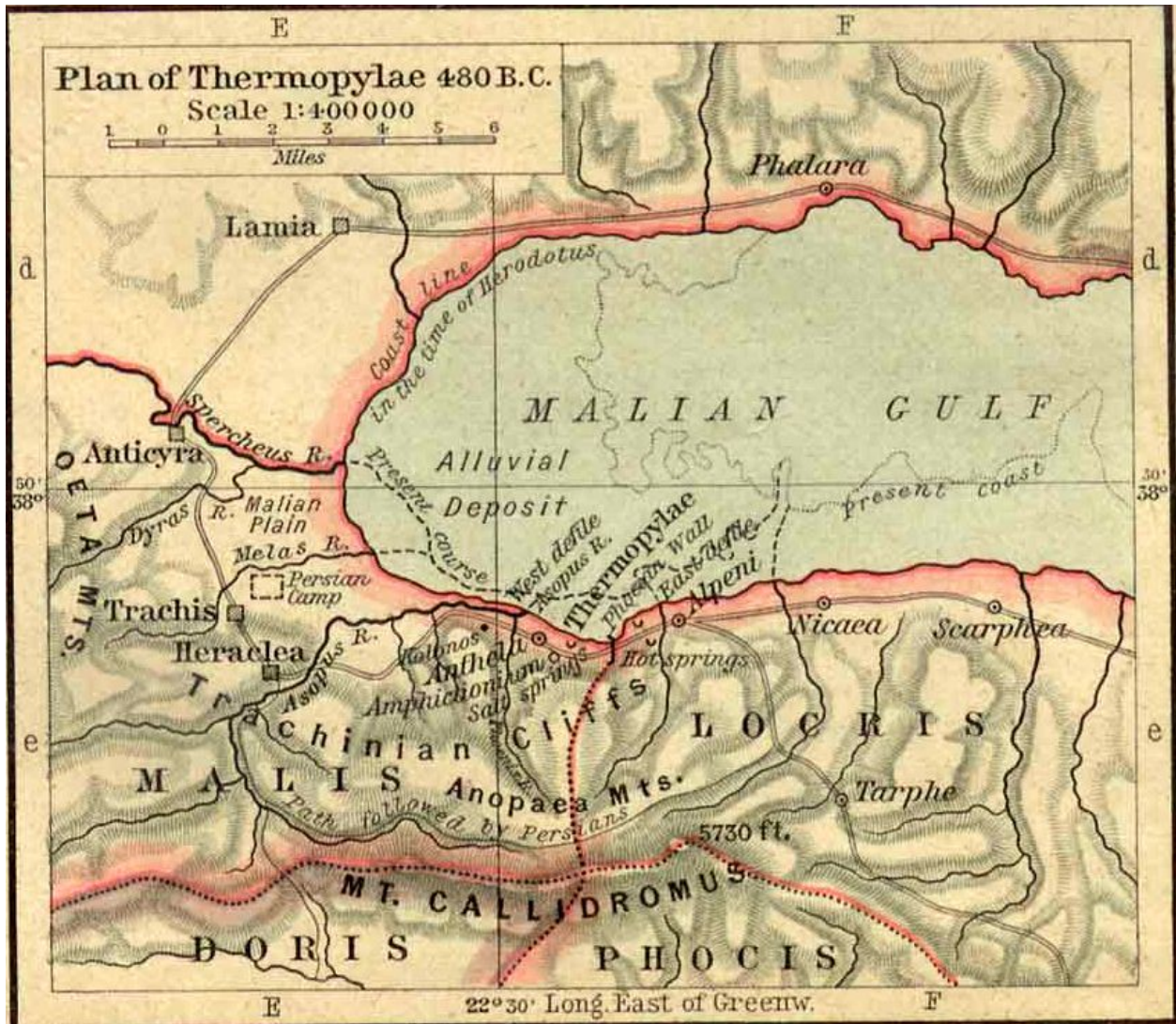
<sup>26</sup> A stone lion was build on that spot to remember the King who died there

today. Even though the Battle of Thermopylae happened nearly 2,500 years ago.

Hundreds of High Schools and Colleges have the Spartans as their mascot.

Thermopylae is a textbook case in military school. A case of men being willing to lay down their lives for what they believe. A sacrifice of few allowing for the victory of many.

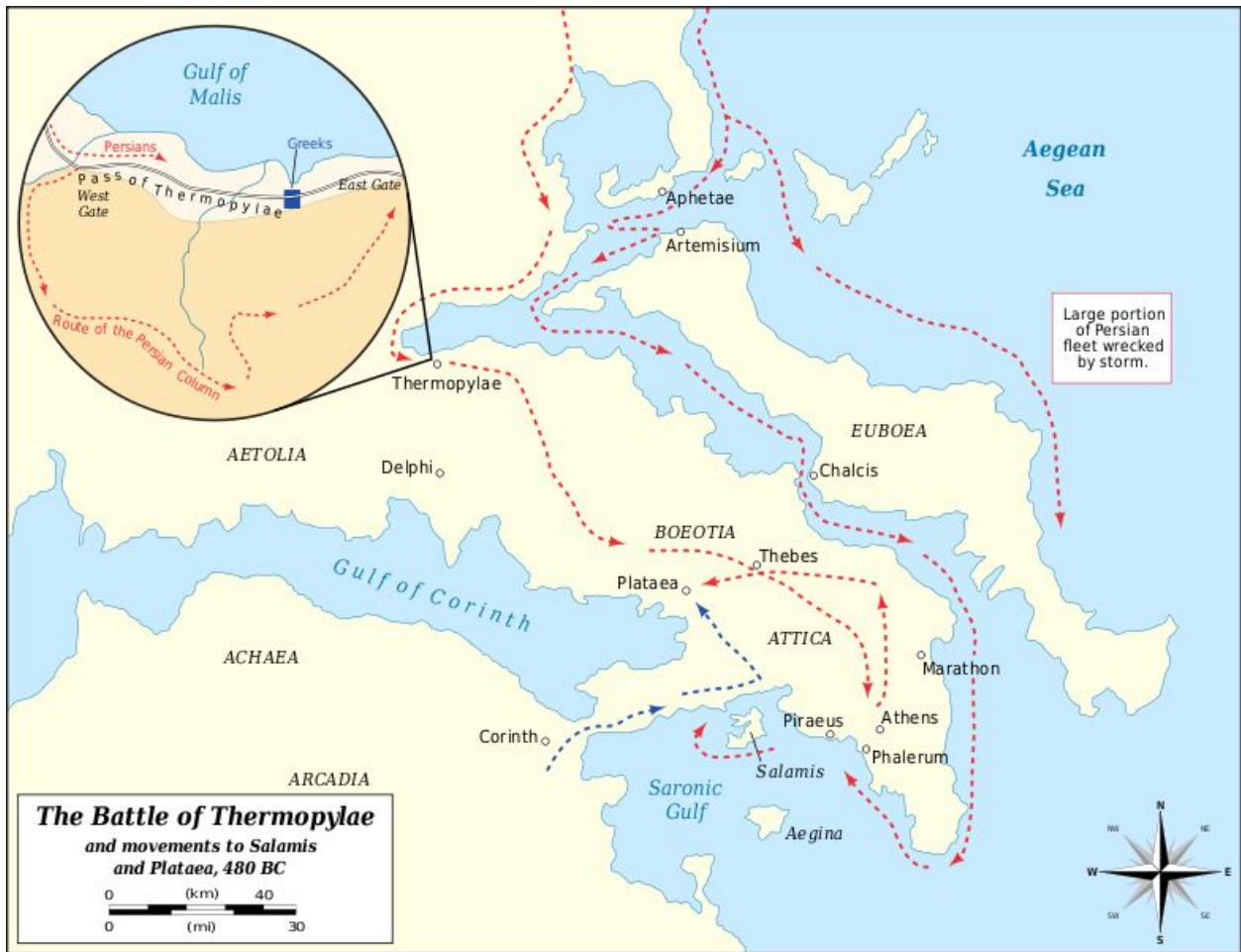
This battle, and the war as a whole, allowed democracy to live on in it's fledgling state, eventually giving way to the world we know today.



Historical Atlas by William Shepherd Pg.16

Map of Thermopylae and surrounding landscape

## Appendix 2



## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

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Many very good quotes, and one of the few "Primary" sources we have.

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Excellent description of the tactics and WHY they worked. I learned WHY the Persians were no match for A Greek Phalanx, and why Thermopylae was so perfect to defend Greece

Green, Peter. *The Greco-Persian Wars*. Berkeley: U of California, 2008. Print.

This book, as in its title, is not about the Battle Of Thermopylae. But Rather the Persian Wars as whole. I learned more about the battles after Thermopylae. Salamis in 480 B.C, and Plataea in 479.

Cartledge, Paul. *Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed the World*. N.p.: Pan, 2013. Print.

One of the best. Learned about lots of modern day connections, as well as causes and effects.

"Greco-Persian Wars: Battle of Thermopylae." *HistoryNet*. N.p., 06 July 2016. Web. 08 Jan. 2018.

<<http://www.historynet.com/greco-persian-wars-battle-of-thermopylae.htm>>.

Excellent article, explains why the Greeks succeeded at the Hot Gates. The Persians could not use their usual tactics, and were ill-prepared to fight as the Hellene defenders did.





