

# An Account of the Greeks' Stand

## Against Persia

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A great many years ago, an epic series of battles decided the fate of the Greek speaking peoples, and their ideas and culture. The society of the Greeks was very nearly trampled by the mighty empire of Persia in the two invasions between 492 BC and 449 BC. This is an account of the stand that the Greek speaking people took against Persia, unintentionally preserving the ideas and governments that would allow the democracy and liberty of today to flourish.

1500 years ago, the region we know as Greece was not quite yet Greece as is today. It was a collection of city-states; cities with their own rulers, laws, armies, and occasionally even their own navies. The people scattered across these city-states had much in common, of course. They spoke the same language, worshipped the same gods, worshipped in the same way, and they thought of themselves as Greeks, though their city-state always came first. The Greek city-states often banded together against outside threats, but they banded together against each other at least as often. Athens was one such city-state.

Athens was the shining star of all the city-states, and was to become the capital of the Greek nation when it was formed. Each city had its own patron god or goddess, and Athen's patron was Pallas Athena, the goddess of Wisdom, which was reflected by their prioritization of education. Athens was a city of great thinkers, of great schools. Girls were taught by their mothers to cook, to sew, to clean, and to be good wives and mothers. Athenian women took this responsibility seriously. Boys went to school, and studied reading, writing, and public speaking, as well as memorizing poetry and learning to play an instrument. Sons of nobles went on to high school for even further education. Their investment in education was a good one, and thus, Athens was one of the most, if not the most, powerful and influential city-states.

Themistocles was the Archon, or chief governor, of Athens during both invasions. His is an interesting and inspiring story. He was of a new breed of politician, un-aristocratic and generally at odds with the nobility of Athens. His power came from his support from the lower classes Athenians. He rose from humble origins to become the most prominent politician of Athens for a period of about twenty years.

Themistocles understood the value of a strong navy and pushed for the development of Athen's navy. In the build up to the second invasion, he even went so far as to take the surplus of a silver mine, which usually went to the poor, to fund the construction of a larger navy. ("Themistocles")

Sparta, a rival of Athens, was another powerful city-state. Its society was based around its military, as the patron god of Sparta was Ares, the god of War. The Spartan warriors were trained starting at a mere six years old, opposed to the standard military age, 18. The boys were worked hard, yet malnourished, which encouraged thievery. The punishment for thievery was severe, so therefore Spartan soldiers learned to be clever in their raids. The city was ruled by a council of retired soldiers, headed by a King from the royal family. Spartans were constantly on military campaigns, and the women, who stayed in Sparta, had many rights. While their husbands were gone, the women worked the land, ran businesses, and were free to move about as they pleased. ("Ancient Greek Civilization")

The Greek military strategy was based around Greek infantrymen, known as Hoplites. These soldiers were clad in heavy bronze armor, carried large shields and fought with long spears. Hoplites were arranged in regiments, or *lokhói*, which were several hundred men strong and eight or nine men deep. The Hoplites' shields were held out in front of them, forming a wall of overlapping shields that preceded them. The Hoplites would stab through the gaps between their shields to engage the enemy. This formation is known as the Greek Phalanx. (Cartwright)

To the east, Persia, the most massive empire ever to exist at the time, was still focused on expansion.

Persia was remarkable for its successful implementation of a centralised government, its extensive infrastructure of roads and postal services, an official language across its empire, and its enormous professional army. Cyrus, along with his successors, was a unique ruler in that he was the first to attempt to rule an empire under the principle of equality of all people under his rule, so long as they paid taxes and kept the peace. Cyrus also did not interfere with the religions and customs of its territories, a quality that made him popular among many of his subjects. However, this preservation of culture led to a higher number of revolts, and one such revolt brought the mighty empire of Persia head to head with the rising western civilization of Greece. ("Second Persian Invasion")



In 499 BCE, Ionian cities under the rule of Persia staged an unsuccessful rebellion against the tyrannical rule of their satraps, Persian governors that answered to the King. Athens and other city-states supported their stand against Persia by sending ships and troops to aid the Ionians. Darius I, King of Persia, who was already looking to subjugate Greece and secure his western border, saw their aid as an offense worthy of invasion. Four years after he quelled the rebellion, Darius, not for the first time, called for Greek submission to Persian rule. Envoys were sent to every city-state in Greece. Most city-states did submit to the Persian superpower, notable exceptions being Athens and Sparta, who both had their envoys executed. Darius gave the order for a military campaign the following year.

The idea of Greek vs Persia was a silly one, a ridiculous notion. Greece was simply a collection of disunited city states with decent militaries, while Persia was the most massive empire to ever exist, a true colossus, represented by the most immense army ever to march upon the earth.

Nonetheless, Athens and Sparta quickly formed an alliance against their common enemy, and prepared for the Persian invasion. Darius launched an offense of 600 ships and 25,000 men to attack a group of islands known as the Cycladic Islands, which were located in the Aegean Sea between Greece and Persia. The Persian force hopped from island to island, subjugating each to Persian rule. The Persians then landed at a city-state called Eretria, and destroyed it. ("Greco-Persian Wars")

Headed towards Athens, the Persian army landed in Attica, on the Plain of Marathon, and prepared for a conclusive battle against the Athenians. The Athenians, for their part, had hastily assembled an army 10,000 men strong, along with 1,000 men from a city-state called Plataea. They were to fight against a Persian army of about 25,000 men.

The Spartans were celebrating their Carneia festival, a sacred period of peace, and were unwilling to interrupt it to aid the Athenians. The Athenians were conflicted over whether to wait and defend against the Persians, or to take the offense. After a five day stalemate, the Greeks discovered that the Persian cavalry was temporarily absent from the military camp. The Athenian Commander in Chief, Miltiades, decided to take the offense. The Persian strategy of long distance arrow firing was to clash with the Greek Phalanx.

The Persian strategy of weakening the enemy with their arrows before charging in and destroying them proved ineffective against the Hoplites, as the arrows fired by the Persians were too lightweight to affect the heavily armored Greeks. The Greeks pulled their inner lines back while pushing

their flanks forward, enveloping the Persian army. The Persians were forced to retreat, forfeiting the battle to the Greeks.

The battle was a huge victory for the Greeks. The Greek historian Herodotus recorded a Persian death count of over 6,400 men, and a Greek death count of a mere 192. Not only did Athens repel the Persians, but they proved that the Persians could be defeated, and by the Greeks. Miltiades' triumph over the Persians instilled an enormous amount of confidence in the Greek people.

("Marathon")

The idea that the Greeks could defeat the Persians in battle, once considered ridiculous, had been proven valid, and because of the courageousness with which the Greeks denied Persia their lands and freedom.

However, the triumph was only temporary, and Persia never forgot their humiliation on the hands of the Greeks. It was only ten years before Darius' son Xerxes led the second invasion.

During the build up to the invasion, Athens and Sparta allied once again against the Persians, and only one tenth of the city-states in Greece joined forces with them. The remainder either stayed neutral or submitted to Persia. When the Persian army began their march, Athens was holding its Olympic Games and Sparta was celebrating its Carneia Festival once again. Interrupting either of these sacred events with military business was considered sacrilegious, but Spartan king Leonidas deemed it necessary to do so. He took his personal guard of 300 men, replacing the customary young men with older veterans with heirs, and a few hundred Helots, a lower class of Spartan citizens, and marched to defend a narrow pass called Thermopylae. It was the ideal spot, as the Greek mountains would be inconvenient to march through, and a narrow pass is easily defended. Leonidas and his men would be ready. ("Greco-Persian Wars")

In the spring of 480 BCE, the Persian army crossed the Hellespont, a narrow strait between the Persian land mass and Macedonia, on a bridge of boats. The Persians marched through Macedonia and met Leonidas and his force at Thermopylae. Along the way to Thermopylae, Leonidas had accumulated men from each sympathetic city-state they passed, and arrived at Thermopylae with about 7,000 men. Xerxes arrived at Thermopylae with a massive Persian force of an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 men. Regardless of the precise ratio from Persians to Greeks truly was, the fact remains that the Greeks were hopelessly outnumbered.

However, the Greek phalanx fared very impressively against Xerxes' forces, and the first day of the Battle of Thermopylae was a massacre, at great cost to the Persians. Xerxes sent his personal guard, 10,000 men strong, to attack the Greeks. Known as "Immortals" for their perceived invincibility, they were slaughtered by Leonidas' forces. The second day was like unto the first.

Unfortunately for the Greeks, there was a traitor in their ranks. By the end of the second day of the battle, a Greek soldier had informed King Xerxes of a shepherd's path through the mountains that led directly behind the Greek position. Such a path would allow Xerxes to surround and destroy the Greek force.

What was left of the Immortals was sent to take this path and surround the Greeks. When Leonidas heard of it, he held a war council at dawn. Many of the soldiers that had joined Leonidas and his brave Spartans left Thermopylae, to live to fight another day, but Leonidas, all 300 of his Spartans, and a handful of the men that had joined them stayed to fight.

At the same time that the the armies of Greece and Persia clashed, their navies faced off at the straits of Artemisium. The Greek navy awaited the arrival of the Persian navy while Leonidas marched



to Thermopylae. As the Persian fleet of 1,200 ships approached, however, they were caught in a summer storm and lost about one third of their ships. They arrived to Artemisium short of ships.

In the naval battle that followed, the Greek fleet, led by Themistocles, held their own against the Persians with a daring and aggressive strategy, although the Persian fleet was much larger than the Greek fleet. After three days, both sides had lost a roughly equal amount of ships. The Greeks, however, could not afford their losses and, as Thermopylae had not held, they surrendered their position at Artemisium and retreated to the straits of Salamis, to aid the evacuation of Athens that was going on at the time.

Themistocles managed to lure the Persian fleet to the straits of Salamis. There, he was able to trick the Persians into stringing their fleet along a canal, negating the advantages of their larger numbers and superior numbers. The Persian fleet was mostly destroyed. ("Salamis")

This situation was bleak for the Persians. Without a fleet, Xerxes was unable to transport his troops to land directly on Peloponnese, the Greek landmass across the Saronic Gulf from the Greek mainland. Xerxes took the bulk of his force and retreated back to Asia, fearing that the Greeks would destroy his bridge across Hellespont and trap him in Europe. He left behind a handpicked force commanded by his general Mardonius to complete his conquest the following year. ("Battle of Artemisium")

Under pressure from Themistocles, the Greeks decided to try to force Mardonius to do battle, and marched to meet his force. ("Themistocles") Mardonius retreated with his army to Boeotia in an attempt to lure the Greeks into a fight in open terrain. The two armies met in a plain near the city of Plataea, and the Greeks won a decisive victory over the Persians, effectively ending the second Persian

invasion. ("Marathon") The near simultaneous naval battle of Mycale saw the end of much of the remaining Persian fleet, reducing the chances of a third invasion. ("Battle of Artemisium")

The firmness and bravery with which the Greeks stood against the Persians proved to be the decisive factor that saved the Greek speaking peoples, whose ideas and culture have truly made the world a better place. The story of the Greco Persian Wars is saturated with individuals taking a stand for what they believed was right. The Ionian Cities, to begin with, rejecting the repressive Persian rule. Sparta, Athens, and their allies, deciding to fight against the Persian army. Leonidas and his 300 men, fighting to the very last man for their beloved people. Themistocles, urging the rest of Greece to take a more daring strategy against Persia, a strategy that would prove essential for victory. Each Greek man, who marched into battles of seemingly hopeless odds, with the conviction to fight to the last to preserve their nation. Their bravery has blessed the lives of many in today's world with freedoms and rights preserved and allowed to exist, however unintentionally, in the Greco Persian Wars.

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