

## **Persian Wars**

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the vast Persian Empire attempted to conquer Greece. If the Persians had succeeded, they would have set up local tyrants, called satraps, to rule Greece and would have crushed the first stirrings of democracy in Europe. The survival of Greek culture and political ideals depended on the ability of the small, disunited Greek city-states to band together and defend themselves against Persia's overwhelming strength. The struggle, known in Western history as the Persian Wars, or Greco-Persian Wars, lasted 20 years—from 499 to 479 B.C.

Persia already numbered among its conquests the Greek cities of Ionia in Asia Minor, where Greek civilization first flourished. The Persian Wars began when some of these cities revolted against Darius I, Persia's king, in 499 B.C.

Athens sent 20 ships to aid the Ionians. Before the Persians crushed the revolt, the Greeks burned Sardis, capital of Lydia. Angered, Darius determined to conquer Athens and extend his empire westward beyond the Aegean Sea.

In 492 B.C. Darius gathered together a great military force and sent 600 ships across the Hellespont. A sudden storm wrecked half his fleet when it was rounding rocky Mount Athos on the Macedonian coast. Two years later Darius dispatched a new battle fleet of 600 triremes. This time his powerful galleys crossed the Aegean Sea without mishap and arrived safely off Attica, the part of Greece that surrounds the city of Athens.

The Persians landed on the plain of Marathon, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) from Athens. When the Athenians learned of their arrival, they sent a swift runner, Pheidippides, to ask Sparta for aid, but the Spartans, who were conducting a religious festival, could not march until the moon was full. Meanwhile the small Athenian army encamped in the foothills on the edge of the Marathon Plain.

The Athenian general Miltiades ordered his small force to advance. He had arranged his men so as to have the greatest strength in the wings. As he expected, his center was driven back. The two wings then united behind the enemy. Thus, hemmed in, the Persians' bows and arrows were of little use. The stout Greek spears spread death and terror. The invaders rushed in panic to their ships. The Greek historian Herodotus says the Persians lost 6,400 men against only 192 on the Greek side. Thus, ended the battle of Marathon (490 B.C.), one of the decisive battles of the world.



Figure 1: Xerxes I, the son of Darius I, ruled Persia during the last years of the Persian Wars. This sculpture is from the north courtyard in the treasury at Persepolis and is from late 6<sup>th</sup>–early 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

Darius planned another expedition, but he died before preparations were completed. This gave the Greeks a ten-year period to prepare for the next battles. Athens built up its naval supremacy in the Aegean under the guidance of Themistocles.

In 480 B.C. the Persians returned, led by King Xerxes, the son of Darius. To avoid another shipwreck off Mount Athos, Xerxes had a canal dug behind the promontory. Across the Hellespont he had the Phoenicians and Egyptians place two bridges of ships, held together by cables of flax and papyrus. A storm destroyed the bridges, but Xerxes ordered the workers to replace them. For seven days and nights his soldiers marched across the bridges.

On the way to Athens, Xerxes found a small force of Greek soldiers holding the narrow pass of Thermopylae, which guarded the way to central Greece. The force was led by Leonidas, king of Sparta. Xerxes sent a message ordering the Greeks to deliver their arms. “Come and take them,” replied Leonidas.

For two days the Greeks’ long spears held the pass. Then a Greek traitor told Xerxes of a roundabout path over the mountains. When Leonidas saw the enemy approaching from the rear, he dismissed his men except the 300 Spartans, who were bound, like himself, to conquer or die. Leonidas was one of the first to fall. Around their leader’s body the gallant Spartans fought first with their swords, then with their hands, until they were slain to the last man.

The Persians moved on to Attica and found it deserted. They set fire to Athens with flaming arrows. Xerxes’ fleet held the Athenian ships bottled up between the coast of Attica and the island of Salamis. His ships outnumbered the Greek ships three to one. The Persians had expected an easy victory, but one after another their ships were sunk or crippled.

Crowded into the narrow strait, the heavy Persian vessels moved with difficulty. The lighter Greek ships rowed out from a circular formation and rammed their prows into the clumsy enemy vessels. Two hundred Persian ships were sunk,



Figure 2: Leonidas at Thermopylae is an oil on canvas painting by Jacques-Louis David from 1814.

others were captured, and the rest fled. Xerxes and his forces hastened back to Persia.

Soon after, the rest of the Persian army was scattered at Plataea (479 B.C.). In the same year Xerxes' fleet was defeated at Mycale. Although a treaty was not signed until 30 years later, the threat of Persian domination was ended.

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