

## = Battle of Thermopylae =

The Battle of Thermopylae ( / ˌθɜːrˈmɒpɪˈliː / th?r @-@ MOP @-@ i @-@ lee ; Greek : ????? ??? ?????????? , Mach? t?n Thermopyl?n ) was fought between an alliance of Greek city @-@ states , led by King Leonidas of Sparta , and the Persian Empire of Xerxes I over the course of three days , during the second Persian invasion of Greece . It took place simultaneously with the naval battle at Artemisium , in August or September 480 BC , at the narrow coastal pass of Thermopylae ( " The Hot Gates " ) . The Persian invasion was a delayed response to the defeat of the first Persian invasion of Greece , which had been ended by the Athenian victory at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC . Xerxes had amassed a huge army and navy , and set out to conquer all of Greece . The Athenian general Themistocles had proposed that the allied Greeks block the advance of the Persian army at the pass of Thermopylae , and simultaneously block the Persian navy at the Straits of Artemisium .

A Greek force of approximately 7 @,@ 000 men marched north to block the pass in the middle of 480 BC . The Persian army , alleged by the ancient sources to have numbered over one million , but today considered to have been much smaller ( various figures are given by scholars , ranging between about 100 @,@ 000 and 150 @,@ 000 ) , arrived at the pass in late August or early September . The vastly outnumbered Greeks held off the Persians for seven days ( including three of battle ) before the rear @-@ guard was annihilated in one of history 's most famous last stands . During two full days of battle , the small force led by Leonidas blocked the only road by which the massive Persian army could pass . After the second day , a local resident named Ephialtes betrayed the Greeks by revealing that a small path led behind the Greek lines . Leonidas , aware that his force was being outflanked , dismissed the bulk of the Greek army and remained to guard their retreat with 300 Spartans , 700 Thespians , 400 Thebans , and perhaps a few hundred others , most of whom were killed .

At Artemisium , the Greek navy , under the command of the Athenian politician Themistocles , received news of the defeat . Since the Greek strategy required both Thermopylae and Artemisium to be held , and given their losses , it was decided to withdraw to Salamis . The Persians overran Boeotia and then captured the evacuated Athens . The Greek fleet ? seeking a decisive victory over the Persian armada ? attacked and defeated the invaders at the Battle of Salamis in late 480 BC . Fearful of being trapped in Europe , Xerxes withdrew with much of his army to Asia ( losing most to starvation and disease ) , leaving Mardonius to attempt to complete the conquest of Greece . However , the following year saw a Greek army decisively defeat the Persians at the Battle of Plataea , thereby ending the Persian invasion .

Both ancient and modern writers have used the Battle of Thermopylae as an example of the power of a patriotic army defending its native soil . The performance of the defenders is also used as an example of the advantages of training , equipment , and good use of terrain as force multipliers and has become a symbol of courage against overwhelming odds .

## = = Background = =

The Greek city @-@ states of Athens and Eretria had encouraged the unsuccessful Ionian Revolt against the Persian Empire of Darius I in 499 ? 494 BC . The Persian Empire was still relatively young , and prone to revolts amongst its subject peoples . Darius , moreover , was a usurper , and had spent considerable time extinguishing revolts against his rule .

The Ionian revolt threatened the integrity of his empire , and Darius thus vowed to punish those involved ; especially the Athenians , " since he was sure that [ the Ionians ] would not go unpunished for their rebellion " . Darius also saw the opportunity to expand his empire into the fractious world of Ancient Greece . A preliminary expedition under Mardonius in 492 BC to secure the land approaches to Greece re @-@ conquered Thrace , and forced Macedon to become a client kingdom of Persia .

Darius sent emissaries to all the Greek city @-@ states in 491 BC asking for a gift of " earth and water " in token of their submission to him . Having had a demonstration of his power the previous

year , the majority of Greek cities duly obliged . In Athens , however , the ambassadors were put on trial and then executed by throwing them in a pit ; in Sparta , they were simply thrown down a well . This meant that Sparta was also effectively at war with Persia .

Darius thus put together an amphibious task force under Datis and Artaphernes in 490 BC , which attacked Naxos , before receiving the submission of the other Cycladic Islands . The task force then moved on Eretria , which it besieged and destroyed . Finally , it moved to attack Athens , landing at the bay of Marathon , where it was met by a heavily outnumbered Athenian army . At the ensuing Battle of Marathon , the Athenians won a remarkable victory , which resulted in the withdrawal of the Persian army to Asia .

Darius therefore began raising a huge new army with which he meant to completely subjugate Greece ; however , in 486 BC , his Egyptian subjects revolted , indefinitely postponing any Greek expedition . Darius then died whilst preparing to march on Egypt , and the throne of Persia passed to his son Xerxes I. Xerxes crushed the Egyptian revolt , and very quickly restarted the preparations for the invasion of Greece . Since this was to be a full @-@ scale invasion , it required long @-@ term planning , stockpiling and conscription . Xerxes decided that the Hellespont would be bridged to allow his army to cross to Europe , and that a canal should be dug across the isthmus of Mount Athos ( rounding which headland , a Persian fleet had been destroyed in 492 BC ) . These were both feats of exceptional ambition , which would have been beyond any other contemporary state . By early 480 BC , the preparations were complete , and the army which Xerxes had mustered at Sardis marched towards Europe , crossing the Hellespont on two pontoon bridges .

The Athenians had also been preparing for war with the Persians since the mid @-@ 480s BC , and in 482 BC the decision was taken , under the guidance of the Athenian politician Themistocles , to build a massive fleet of triremes that would be essential for the Greeks to fight the Persians . However , the Athenians did not have the manpower to fight on both land and sea ; and therefore combating the Persians would require an alliance of Greek city states . In 481 BC , Xerxes sent ambassadors around Greece asking for ' earth and water ' but making the very deliberate omission of Athens and Sparta . Support thus began to coalesce around these two leading states . A congress of city states met at Corinth in late autumn of 481 BC , and a confederate alliance of Greek city @-@ states was formed . It had the power to send envoys asking for assistance and to dispatch troops from the member states to defensive points after joint consultation . This was remarkable for the disjointed Greek world , especially since many of the city @-@ states in attendance were still technically at war with each other .

The ' congress ' met again in the spring of 480 BC . A Thessalian delegation suggested that the Greeks could muster in the narrow Vale of Tempe , on the borders of Thessaly , and thereby block Xerxes ' advance . A force of 10 @,@ 000 hoplites was dispatched to the Vale of Tempe , through which they believed the Persian army would have to pass . However , once there , being warned by Alexander I of Macedon that the vale could be bypassed through Sarantoporo Pass , and that the army of Xerxes was overwhelming , the Greeks retreated . Shortly afterwards , they received the news that Xerxes had crossed the Hellespont .

A second strategy was therefore suggested by Themistocles to the Greeks . The route to southern Greece ( Boeotia , Attica and the Peloponnesus ) would require the army of Xerxes to travel through the very narrow pass of Thermopylae . This could easily be blocked by the Greek hoplites , despite the overwhelming numbers of Persians . Furthermore , to prevent the Persians bypassing Thermopylae by sea , the Athenian and allied navies could block the straits of Artemisium . This dual strategy was adopted by the congress . However , the Peloponnesian cities made fall @-@ back plans to defend the Isthmus of Corinth should it come to that , whilst the women and children of Athens had been evacuated en masse to the Peloponnesian city of Troezen .

= = Prelude = =

The Persian army seems to have made slow progress through Thrace and Macedon . News of the imminent Persian approach eventually reached Greece in August thanks to a Greek spy . At this time of year the Spartans , de facto military leaders of the alliance , were celebrating the festival of

Carneia . During the Carneia , military activity was forbidden by Spartan law ; the Spartans had arrived too late at the Battle of Marathon because of this requirement . It was also the time of the Olympic Games , and therefore the Olympic truce , and thus it would have been doubly sacrilegious for the whole Spartan army to march to war . On this occasion , the ephors decided the urgency was sufficiently great to justify an advance expedition to block the pass , under one of its kings , Leonidas I. Leonidas took with him the 300 men of the royal bodyguard , the Hippeis . This expedition was to try to gather as many other Greek soldiers along the way as possible , and to await the arrival of the main Spartan army .

The legend of Thermopylae , as told by Herodotus , has it that the Spartans consulted the Oracle at Delphi earlier in the year . The Oracle is said to have made the following prophecy :

O ye men who dwell in the streets of broad Lacedaemon ! Honor the festival of the Carneia ! ! Otherwise , Either your glorious town shall be sacked by the children of Perseus , Or , in exchange , must all through the whole Laconian country

Mourn for the loss of a king , descendant of great Heracles .

Herodotus tells us that Leonidas , in line with the prophecy , was convinced he was going to certain death since his forces were not adequate for a victory , and so he selected only Spartans with living sons .

The Spartan force was reinforced en route to Thermopylae by contingents from various cities and numbered more than 7 @,@ 000 by the time it arrived at the pass . Leonidas chose to camp at , and defend , the ' middle gate ' , the narrowest part of the pass of Thermopylae , where the Phocians had built a defensive wall some time before . News also reached Leonidas , from the nearby city of Trachis , that there was a mountain track which could be used to outflank the pass of Thermopylae . Leonidas stationed 1 @,@ 000 Phocians on the heights to prevent such a manoeuvre .

Finally , in mid @-@ August , the Persian army was sighted across the Malian Gulf approaching Thermopylae . With the Persian army 's arrival at Thermopylae the Greeks held a council of war . Some Peloponnesians suggested withdrawal to the Isthmus of Corinth and blocking the passage to Peloponnesus . The Phocians and Locrians , whose states were located nearby , became indignant and advised defending Thermopylae and sending for more help . Leonidas calmed the panic and agreed to defend Thermopylae . According to Plutarch , when one of the soldiers complained that " Because of the arrows of the barbarians it is impossible to see the sun " , Leonidas replied : " Won 't it be nice , then , if we shall have shade in which to fight them ? " Herodotus reports a similar comment , but attributes it to Dienekes .

A Persian emissary was sent by Xerxes to negotiate with Leonidas . The Greeks were offered their freedom and the title " Friends of the Persian People " . Moreover , they would be re @-@ settled on land better than that they possessed . When these terms were refused by Leonidas , the ambassador carried a written message by Xerxes , asking him to " Hand over your arms " . Leonidas ' famous response was for the Persians to " Come and take them " ( ????? ???? ) . With the Persian embassy returning empty @-@ handed , battle became inevitable . Xerxes delayed for four days , waiting for the Greeks to disperse , before sending troops to attack them .

= = Opposing forces = =

= = = Persian army = = =

The number of troops which Xerxes mustered for the second invasion of Greece has been the subject of endless dispute , because the numbers given in ancient sources are very large indeed . Herodotus claimed that there were , in total , 2 @.@ 6 million military personnel , accompanied by an equivalent number of support personnel . The poet Simonides , who was a near @-@ contemporary , talks of four million ; Ctesias gave 800 @,@ 000 as the total number of the army that was assembled by Xerxes .

Modern scholars tend to reject the figures given by Herodotus and other ancient sources as unrealistic , and as a result of miscalculations or exaggerations on the part of the victors . Modern

scholarly estimates are generally in the range 70 000 ? 300 000 . These estimates usually come from studying the logistical capabilities of the Persians in that era , the sustainability of their respective base of operations , and the overall manpower constraints affecting them . Whatever the real numbers were , however , it is clear that Xerxes was anxious to ensure a successful expedition by mustering an overwhelming numerical superiority by land and by sea . The number of Persian troops present at Thermopylae is therefore as uncertain as the number for the total invasion force . For instance , it is unclear whether the whole Persian army marched as far as Thermopylae , or whether Xerxes left garrisons in Macedon and Thessaly .

== Greek army ==

According to Herodotus , and Diodorus Siculus , the Greek army included the following forces :

Notes :

The number of Peloponnesians

Diodorus suggests that there were 1 000 Lacedemonians and 3 000 other Peloponnesians , for a total of 4 000 . Herodotus agrees with this figure in one passage , quoting an inscription by Simonides saying there were 4 000 Peloponnesians . However , elsewhere , in the passage summarized by the above table , Herodotus tallies 3 100 Peloponnesians at Thermopylae before the battle . Herodotus also reports that at Xerxes ' public showing of the dead , " helots were also there for them to see " , but he does not say how many or in what capacity they served . Thus , the difference between his two figures can be squared by supposing ( without proof ) that there were 900 helots ( three per Spartan ) present at the battle . If helots were present at the battle , there is no reason to doubt that they served in their traditional role as armed retainers to individual Spartans . Alternatively , Herodotus ' " missing " 900 troops might have been Perioeci , and could therefore correspond to Diodorus ' 1 000 Lacedemonians .

The number of Lacedemonians

Further confusing the issue is Diodorus ' ambiguity about whether his 1 000 Lacedemonians include the 300 Spartans . At one point he says : " Leonidas , when he received the appointment , announced that only one thousand men should follow him on the campaign " . However , he then says that : " There were , then , of the Lacedaemonians one thousand , and with them three hundred Spartiates " . It is therefore impossible to be clearer on this point .

Pausanias ' account agrees with that of Herodotus ( whom he probably read ) except that he gives the number of Locrians , which Herodotus declined to estimate . Residing in the direct path of the Persian advance , they gave all the fighting men they had ; according to Pausanias 6 000 men , which added to Herodotus ' 5 200 would have given a force of 11 200 .

Many modern historians , who usually consider Herodotus more reliable , add the 1 000 Lacedaemonians and the 900 helots to Herodotus ' 5 200 to obtain 7 100 or about 7 000 men as a standard number , neglecting Diodorus ' Melians and Pausanias ' Locrians . However , this is only one approach , and many other combinations are plausible . Furthermore , the numbers changed later on in the battle when most of the army retreated and only approximately 3 000 men remained ( 300 Spartans , 700 Thespians , 400 Thebans , possibly up to 900 helots and 1 000 Phocians stationed above the pass ; less the casualties sustained in the previous days ) .

== Strategic and tactical considerations ==

From a strategic point of view , by defending Thermopylae , the Greeks were making the best possible use of their forces . As long as they could prevent further Persian advance into Greece , they had no need to seek a decisive battle , and could thus remain on the defensive . Moreover , by defending two constricted passages ( Thermopylae and Artemisium ) , the Greeks ' inferior numbers became less of a factor . Conversely , for the Persians the problem of supplying such a large army meant that the Persians could not remain in the same place for too long . The Persians therefore had to retreat or advance ; and advancing required the pass of Thermopylae to be forced .

Tactically , the pass at Thermopylae was ideally suited to the Greek style of warfare . A hoplite phalanx would be able to block the narrow pass with ease , with no risk of being outflanked by cavalry . In the pass , the phalanx would have been very difficult to assault for the more lightly armed Persian infantry . The major weak point for the Greeks was the mountain track which led across the highland parallel to Thermopylae , and which would allow their position to be outflanked . Although probably unsuitable for cavalry , this path could easily be traversed by the Persian infantry ( many of whom were versed in mountain warfare ) . Leonidas was made aware of this path by local people from Trachis , and he positioned a detachment of Phocian troops there in order to block this route .

= = = Topography of the battlefield = = =

At the time , the pass of Thermopylae consisted of a track along the shore of the Malian Gulf so narrow that only one chariot could pass through at a time . On the southern side of the track stood the cliffs that overlooked the pass , and on the north side was the Malian Gulf . Along the path itself was a series of three constrictions , or " gates " ( pylai ) , and at the center gate a short wall that had been erected by the Phocians in the previous century to aid in their defense against Thessalian invasions . The name " Hot Gates " comes from the hot springs that were located there .

The terrain of the battlefield was nothing that Xerxes and his forces were accustomed to . Although coming from a mountainous country , the Persians were not prepared for the real nature of the country they had invaded . The pure ruggedness of this area is caused by torrential downpours for four months of the year , combined with an intense summer season of scorching heat that cracks the ground . Vegetation is scarce and consists of low shrubs that are of the thorny type . The hillsides along the pass are covered in thick brush , some plants reaching 10 feet ( 3 @. @ 0 m ) high . With a dangerous cliff to the ocean on one side and steep , impassable hills on the other , King Leonidas and his men chose the perfect topographical position to battle the Persian invaders .

Today , the pass is not near the sea , but is several kilometres inland because of sedimentation in the Malian Gulf . The old track appears at the foot of hills around the plain , flanked by a modern road . Recent core samples indicate that the pass was only 100 metres ( 330 ft ) wide and the waters came up to the gates ; " Little do the visitors realize that the battle took place across the road from the monument . " The pass still is a natural defensive position to modern armies , and British Commonwealth forces in World War II made a defense in 1941 against the Nazi invasion metres from the original battlefield .

Maps of the region :

Image of the battlefield , from the east

= = Battle = =

= = = First day = = =

On the fifth day after the Persian arrival at Thermopylae and the first day of the battle , Xerxes finally resolved to attack the Greeks . First , he ordered five thousand archers to fire a barrage of arrows , but they were ineffective ; they fired from at least 100 yards away , according to modern day scholars , and the Greeks ' bronze shields and helmets deflected the missiles . After that , Xerxes sent a force of ten thousand Medes and Cissians to take the defenders prisoner and bring them before him . The Persians soon launched a frontal assault , in waves of around 10 @, @ 000 men , on the Greek position . The Greeks fought in front of the Phocian wall , at the narrowest part of the pass , which enabled them to use as few soldiers as possible . Details of the tactics are scant ; Diodorus says " the men stood shoulder to shoulder " and the Greeks were " superior in valor and in the great size of their shields . " This probably describes the standard Greek phalanx , in which the men formed a wall of overlapping shields and layered spear points protruding out from the sides of the shields , which would have been highly effective as long as it spanned the width of the pass .

The weaker shields and shorter spears and swords of the Persians prevented them from effectively engaging the Greek hoplites . Herodotus says that the units for each city were kept together ; units were rotated in and out of the battle to prevent fatigue , which implies the Greeks had more men than necessary to block the pass . The Greeks killed so many Medes that Xerxes is said to have stood up three times from the seat from which he was watching the battle . According to Ctesias , the first wave was " cut to ribbons " , with only two or three Spartans killed in return .

According to Herodotus and Diodorus , the king , having taken the measure of the enemy , threw his best troops into a second assault the same day , the Immortals , an elite corps of 10 @, @ 000 men . However , the Immortals fared no better than the Medes , failing to make any headway against the Greeks . The Spartans apparently used a tactic of feigning retreat , and then turning and killing the enemy troops when they ran after them .

= = = Second day = = =

On the second day , Xerxes again sent in the infantry to attack the pass , " supposing that their enemies , being so few , were now disabled by wounds and could no longer resist . " However , the Persians had no more success on the second day than on the first . Xerxes at last stopped the assault and withdrew to his camp , " totally perplexed " .

Late that day , however , as the Persian king was pondering what to do next , he received a windfall ; a Trachinian named Ephialtes informed him of the mountain path around Thermopylae and offered to guide the Persian army . Ephialtes was motivated by the desire for a reward . For this act , the name of Ephialtes received a lasting stigma , his name coming to mean " nightmare " in the Greek language and becoming the archetypal traitor in Greek culture .

Herodotus reports that Xerxes sent his commander Hydarnes that evening , with the men under his command , the Immortals , to encircle the Greeks via the path . However , he does not say who those men were . The Immortals had been bloodied on the first day , so it is possible that Hydarnes may have been given overall command of an enhanced force including what was left of the Immortals , and indeed , according to Diodorus , Hydarnes had a force of 20 @, @ 000 for the mission . The path led from east of the Persian camp along the ridge of Mt . Anopaea behind the cliffs that flanked the pass . It branched , with one path leading to Phocis and the other down to the Malian Gulf at Alpenus , first town of Locris .

= = = Third day = = =

At daybreak on the third day , the Phocians guarding the path above Thermopylae became aware of the outflanking Persian column by the rustling of oak leaves . Herodotus says that they jumped up and were greatly amazed . Hydarnes was perhaps just as amazed to see them hastily arming themselves as they were to see him and his forces . He feared that they were Spartans , but was informed by Ephialtes that they were not . The Phocians retreated to a nearby hill to make their stand ( assuming that the Persians had come to attack them ) . However , not wishing to be delayed , the Persians merely shot a volley of arrows at them , before bypassing them to continue with their encirclement of the main Greek force .

Learning from a runner that the Phocians had not held the path , Leonidas called a council of war at dawn . According to Diodorus , a Persian called Tyrrhastidas , a Cymaean by birth , warned the Greeks . Some of the Greeks argued for withdrawal , but Leonidas resolved to stay at the pass with the Spartans . Many of the Greek contingents then either chose to withdraw ( without orders ) , or were ordered to leave by Leonidas ( Herodotus admits that there is some doubt about which actually happened ) . The contingent of 700 Thespians , led by their general Demophilus , refused to leave and committed themselves to the fight . Also present were the 400 Thebans , and probably the helots who had accompanied the Spartans .

Leonidas ' actions have been the subject of much discussion . It is commonly stated that the Spartans were obeying the laws of Sparta by not retreating , but it seems it was actually the failure to retreat from Thermopylae that gave rise to the notion that Spartans never retreated . It is also

possible that , recalling the words of the Oracle , Leonidas was committed to sacrifice his life in order to save Sparta . However , since the prophecy was specific to him , this seems a poor reason to commit 1 @, @ 500 other men to a fight to the death . The most likely theory is that Leonidas chose to form a rearguard so that the other Greek contingents could get away . If all the troops had retreated , the open ground beyond the pass would have allowed the Persian cavalry to run the Greeks down . If they had all remained at the pass , they would have been encircled and would eventually have all been killed . By covering the retreat and continuing to block the pass , Leonidas could save more than 3 @, @ 000 men , who would be able to fight again . The Thebans have also been the subject of some discussion . Herodotus suggests that they were brought to the battle as hostages to ensure the good behavior of Thebes . However , as Plutarch long ago pointed out , if they were hostages , why not send them away with the rest of the Greeks ? The likelihood is that these were the Theban ' loyalists ' , who unlike the majority of their fellow citizens , objected to Persian domination . They thus probably came to Thermopylae of their own free will and stayed to the end because they could not return to Thebes if the Persians conquered Boeotia . The Thespians , resolved as they were not to submit to Xerxes , faced the destruction of their city if the Persians took Boeotia . However , this alone does not explain the fact that they remained ; the remainder of Thespieae was successfully evacuated before the Persians arrived there . It seems that the Thespians volunteered to remain as a simple act of self @-@ sacrifice , all the more amazing since their contingent represented every single hoplite the city could muster . This seems to have been a particularly Thespian trait ? on at least two other occasions in later history , a Thespian force would commit itself to a fight to the death .

At dawn , Xerxes made libations , pausing to allow the Immortals sufficient time to descend the mountain , and then began his advance . A Persian force of ten thousand men , consisting of light infantry and cavalry , charged at the front of the Greek formation . The Greeks this time sallied forth from the wall to meet the Persians in the wider part of the pass in an attempt to slaughter as many Persians as they could . They fought with spears until every spear was shattered and then switched to xiph? ( short swords ) . In this struggle , Herodotus states that two brothers of Xerxes fell : Abrocomes and Hyperanthes . Leonidas also died in the assault , shot down by Persian archers , and the two sides fought over his body , the Greeks taking possession . As the Immortals approached , the Greeks withdrew and took a stand on a hill behind the wall . The Thebans " moved away from their companions , and with hands upraised , advanced toward the barbarians ... " ( Rawlinson translation ) , but a few were slain before their surrender was accepted . The king later had the Theban prisoners branded with the royal mark . Of the remaining defenders , Herodotus says :

" Here they defended themselves to the last , those who still had swords using them , and the others resisting with their hands and teeth . "

Tearing down part of the wall , Xerxes ordered the hill surrounded , and the Persians rained down arrows until every last Greek was dead . In 1939 , archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos , excavating at Thermopylae , found large numbers of Persian bronze arrowheads on Kolonos Hill , changing the identification of the hill on which the Greeks died from a smaller one nearer the wall .

The pass at Thermopylae was thus opened to the Persian army , according to Herodotus , at the cost to the Persians of up to 20 @, @ 000 fatalities . The Greek rearguard , meanwhile , was annihilated , with a probable loss of 2 @, @ 000 men , including those killed on the first two days of battle . Herodotus says at one point that 4 @, @ 000 Greeks died , but assuming that the Phocians guarding the track were not killed during the battle ( as Herodotus implies ) , this would be almost every Greek soldier present ( by Herodotus ' own estimates ) , and this number is probably too high .

= = Aftermath = =

When the body of Leonidas was recovered by the Persians , Xerxes , in a rage against Leonidas , ordered that the head be cut off and the body crucified . Herodotus observes that it was very uncommon for the Persians , as they had the habit of treating " valiant warriors " with great honour (

the example of Pytheas , captured off Skiathos before the Battle of Artemisium , strengthens this suggestion ) . However , Xerxes was known for his rage . Legend has it that he had the Hellespont whipped , the water itself , because it would not obey him .

After the Persians ' departure , the Greeks collected their dead and buried them on the hill . After the Persian invasion was repulsed , a stone lion was erected at Thermopylae to commemorate Leonidas . A full 40 years after the battle , Leonidas ' bones were returned to Sparta , where he was buried again with full honors ; funeral games were held every year in his memory .

With Thermopylae now opened to the Persian army , the continuation of the blockade at Artemisium by the Greek fleet became irrelevant . The simultaneous naval Battle of Artemisium had been a tactical stalemate , and the Greek navy was able to retreat in good order to the Saronic Gulf , where they helped to ferry the remaining Athenian citizens to the island of Salamis .

Following Thermopylae , the Persian army proceeded to burn and sack Plataea and Thespieae , the Boeotian cities that had not submitted , before it marched on the now evacuated city of Athens . Meanwhile , the Greeks ( for the most part Peloponnesians ) prepared to defend the Isthmus of Corinth , demolishing the single road that led through it and building a wall across it . As at Thermopylae , to make this an effective strategy required the Greek navy to stage a simultaneous blockade , barring the passage of the Persian navy across the Saronic Gulf , so that troops could not be landed directly on the Peloponnese . However , instead of a mere blockade , Themistocles persuaded the Greeks to seek a decisive victory against the Persian fleet . Luring the Persian navy into the Straits of Salamis , the Greek fleet was able to destroy much of the Persian fleet in the Battle of Salamis , which essentially ended the threat to the Peloponnese .

Fearing that the Greeks might attack the bridges across the Hellespont and trap his army in Europe , Xerxes now retreated with much of the army back to Asia , though nearly all of them died of starvation and disease on the return . He left a handpicked force under Mardonius to complete the conquest the following year . However , under pressure from the Athenians , the Peloponnesians eventually agreed to try to force Mardonius to battle , and marched on Attica . Mardonius retreated to Boeotia to lure the Greeks into open terrain , and the two sides eventually met near the city of Plataea . At the Battle of Plataea , the Greek army won a decisive victory , destroying much of the Persian army , and ending the invasion of Greece . Meanwhile , at the near @-@ simultaneous naval Battle of Mycale , they also destroyed much of the remaining Persian fleet , thereby reducing the threat of further invasions .

Thermopylae is arguably the most famous battle in European ancient history , repeatedly referenced in ancient , recent , and contemporary culture . In Western culture at least , it is the Greeks who are lauded for their performance in battle . However , within the context of the Persian invasion , Thermopylae was undoubtedly a defeat for the Greeks . It seems clear that the Greek strategy was to hold off the Persians at Thermopylae and Artemisium ; whatever they may have intended , it was presumably not their desire to surrender all of Boeotia and Attica to the Persians . The Greek position at Thermopylae , despite being massively outnumbered , was nearly impregnable . If the position had been held for even a little longer , the Persians might have had to retreat for lack of food and water . Thus , despite the heavy losses , forcing the pass was strategically a Persian victory , but the successful retreat of the bulk of the Greek troops was in its own sense a victory as well . The battle itself had showed that a few free men were willing to do anything for victory against the invaders . The defeat at Thermopylae had turned Leonidas and the men under his command into martyrs . That boosted the morale of all Greek soldiers in the second Persian invasion .

It is sometimes stated that Thermopylae was a Pyrrhic victory for the Persians , one in which the victor is as damaged by the battle as the defeated party . However , there is no suggestion by Herodotus that the effect on the Persian forces was that . The idea ignores the fact that the Persians would , in the aftermath of Thermopylae , conquer the majority of Greece , and the fact that they were still fighting in Greece a year later . Alternatively , the argument is sometimes advanced that the last stand at Thermopylae was a successful delaying action that gave the Greek navy time to prepare for the Battle of Salamis . However , compared to the probable time ( about one month ) between Thermopylae and Salamis , the time bought was negligible . Furthermore , this idea also



neglects the fact that a Greek navy was fighting at Artemisium during the Battle of Thermopylae , incurring losses in the process . George Cawkwell suggests that the gap between Thermopylae and Salamis was caused by Xerxes systematically reducing Greek opposition in Phocis and Boeotia , and not as a result of the Battle of Thermopylae ; thus , as a delaying action , Thermopylae was insignificant compared to Xerxes 's own procrastination . Far from labeling Thermopylae as a Pyrrhic victory , modern academic treatises on the Greco - Persian Wars tend to emphasise the success of Xerxes in breaching the formidable Greek position and the subsequent conquest of the majority of Greece . For instance , Cawkwell states that " he was successful on both land and sea , and the Great Invasion began with a brilliant success . . . Xerxes had every reason to congratulate himself " , while Lazenby describes the Greek defeat as " disastrous " .

The fame of Thermopylae is thus principally derived not from its effect on the outcome of the war but for the inspirational example it set . Thermopylae is famous because of the heroism of the doomed rearguard , who , despite facing certain death , remained at the pass . Ever since , the events of Thermopylae have been the source of effusive praise from many sources : " ... the fairest sister @-@ victories which the Sun has ever seen , yet they would never dare to compare their combined glory with the glorious defeat of King Leonidas and his men . " A second reason is the example it set of free men , fighting for their country and their freedom :

So almost immediately , contemporary Greeks saw Thermopylae as a critical moral and culture lesson . In universal terms , a small , free people had willingly outfought huge numbers of imperial subjects who advanced under the lash . More specifically , the Western idea that soldiers themselves decide where , how , and against whom they will fight was contrasted against the Eastern notion of despotism and monarchy ? freedom proving the stronger idea as the more courageous fighting of the Greeks at Thermopylae , and their later victories at Salamis and Plataea attested .

While this paradigm of " free men " outfighting " slaves " can be seen as a rather sweeping over @-@ generalization ( there are plenty of counter @-@ examples ) , it is nevertheless true that many commentators have used Thermopylae to illustrate this point .

Militarily , although the battle was actually not decisive in the context of the Persian invasion , Thermopylae is also of some significance , on the basis of the first two days of fighting . The performance of the defenders is used as an example of the advantages of training , equipment , and good use of terrain as force multipliers .

== Legacy ==

=== Monuments ===

There are several monuments around the battlefield of Thermopylae .

===== Epitaph of Simonides =====

A well @-@ known epigram , usually attributed to Simonides , was engraved as an epitaph on a commemorative stone placed on top of the burial mound of the Spartans at Thermopylae . It is also the hill on which the last of them died . The original stone has not survived , but in 1955 , the epitaph was engraved on a new stone . The text from Herodotus is :

? ????', ?????????? ?????????????????? ??? ???? ?

????????, ????? ??????? ??????? ?????????????

? ksein ' , angellein Lakedaimoniois hoti t?ide

keimetha , tois kein?n rh?masi peithomenoi .

Oh stranger , tell the Lacedaemonians that

we lie here , trusting their words .

The alternative ancient reading ?????????? ?????????? for ??????? ?????????????? substitutes " laws " or " orders " for " words . " In other words , the " orders " are not personal but refer to official and

binding phrases ( the Ancient Greek term can also refer to a formal speech ) .

The form of this ancient Greek poetry is an elegiac couplet , commonly used for epitaphs . Some English renderings are given in the table below . It is also an example of Laconian brevity , a spartan style of verse that allows for varying interpretations of the meaning of the poem . Ioannis Ziogas points out that the usual English translations are far from the only interpretation possible , and indicate much about the romantic tendencies of the translators .

It was well known in ancient Greece that all the Spartans who had been sent to Thermopylae had been killed there ( with the exception of Aristodemus and Pantites ) , and the epitaph exploits the conceit that there was nobody left to bring the news of their deeds back to Sparta . Greek epitaphs often appealed to the passing reader ( always called ' stranger ' ) for sympathy , but the epitaph for the dead Spartans at Thermopylae took this convention much further than usual , asking the reader to make a personal journey to Sparta to break the news that the Spartan expeditionary force had been wiped out . The stranger is also asked to stress that the Spartans died ' fulfilling their orders ' .

The first line of the epigram was used as the title of the short story " Stranger , Bear Word to the Spartans We ? " by German Nobel Prize laureate Heinrich Böll . A variant of the epigram is inscribed on the Polish Cemetery at Monte Cassino .

John Ruskin expressed the importance of this ideal to Western civilization as follows :

Also obedience in its highest form is not obedience to a constant and compulsory law , but a persuaded or voluntary yielded obedience to an issued command .... His name who leads the armies of Heaven is " Faithful and True " ... and all deeds which are done in alliance with these armies ... are essentially deeds of faith , which therefore ... is at once the source and the substance of all known deed , rightly so called ... as set forth in the last word of the noblest group of words ever , so far as I know , uttered by simple man concerning his practice , being the final testimony of the leaders of a great practical nation ... [ the epitaph in Greek ]

===== Leonidas monument =====

Additionally , there is a modern monument at the site , called the " Leonidas Monument " , in honor of the Spartan king . It features a bronze statue of Leonidas . A sign , under the statue , reads simply : " ????? ???? " ( " Come and take them ! " ? as in answer to Xerxes ' demand that the Greeks give up their weapons ) . The metope below depicts battle scenes . The two marble statues on the left and the right of the monument represent , respectively , the river Eurotas and Mount Taygetos , famous landmarks of Sparta .

===== Thespian monument =====

In 1997 , a second monument was officially unveiled by the Greek government , dedicated to the 700 Thespians who fought with the Spartans . The monument is made of marble and features a bronze statue depicting the god Eros , to whom the ancient Thespians accorded particular religious veneration . Under the statue , a sign reads " In memory of the seven hundred Thespians . "

A plate , below the statue , explains its symbolism :

The headless male figure symbolizes the anonymous sacrifice of the 700 Thespians to their country .

The outstretched chest symbolizes the struggle , the gallantry , the strength , the bravery and the courage .

The open wing symbolizes the victory , the glory , the soul , the spirit and the freedom .

The broken wing symbolizes the voluntary sacrifice and death .

The naked body symbolizes Eros , the most important god of the ancient Thespians , a god of creation , beauty and life .

The monument to the Thespians is placed beside the one to the Spartans .

===== Associated legends =====

Herodotus ' colorful account of the battle has provided history with many apocryphal incidents and conversations away from the main historical events . These accounts are obviously not verifiable , but they form an integral part of the legend of the battle . They often demonstrate the Laconic speech ( and wit ) of the Spartans to good effect .

For instance , Plutarch recounts in his Sayings of Spartan Women that upon his departure , Leonidas ' wife Gorgo asked what she should do if he did not return ; to which Leonidas replied , " Marry a good man and have good children . "

It is reported that , upon arriving at Thermopylae , the Persians sent a mounted scout to reconnoiter . The Greeks allowed him to come up to the camp , observe them , and depart . When the scout reported to Xerxes the size of the Greek force and that the Spartans were indulging in calisthenics and combing their long hair , Xerxes found the reports laughable . Seeking the counsel of Demaratus , an exiled Spartan king in his retinue , Xerxes was told that the Spartans were preparing for battle and that it was their custom to adorn their hair when they were about to risk their lives . Demaratus called them " the bravest men in Greece " and warned the Great King that they intended to dispute the pass . He emphasized that he had tried to warn Xerxes earlier in the campaign , but the king had refused to believe him . He added that if Xerxes ever managed to subdue the Spartans , " there is no other nation in all the world which will venture to lift a hand in their defense . "

Herodotus also describes the reception of a Persian embassy by Leonidas . The ambassador told Leonidas that Xerxes would offer him the kingship of all Greece if he joined with Xerxes . Leonidas answered : " If you had any knowledge of the noble things of life , you would refrain from coveting others ' possessions ; but for me to die for Greece is better than to be the sole ruler over the people of my race . " Then the ambassador asked him more forcefully to surrender their arms . To this Leonidas gave his famous answer : ????? ???? ( pronounced Greek pronunciation : [ mo?l??n la?be ] ) " Come and get them . "

Such Laconic bravery doubtlessly helped to maintain morale . Herodotus writes that when Dienekes , a Spartan soldier , was informed that Persian arrows would be so numerous as " to block out the sun " , he retorted , unconcerned ; " So much the better ... then we shall fight our battle in the shade . "

After the battle , Xerxes was curious as to what the Greeks had been trying to do ( presumably because they had had so few men ) and had some Arcadian deserters interrogated in his presence . The answer was that all the other men were participating in the Olympic Games . When Xerxes asked what was the prize for the winner , the answer was " an olive @-@ wreath " . Upon hearing this , Tigranes , a Persian general , said : " Good heavens , Mardonius , what kind of men are these that you have pitted against us ? It is not for riches that they contend but for honor ! " ( Godley translation ) or otherwise " Ye Gods , Mardonius , what men have you brought us to fight against ? Men that fight not for gold , but for glory . "

= = = In popular culture = = =

The Battle of Thermopylae has remained an icon of western civilization ever since it was fought . The battle is revisited in countless adages , in literature in song , and in films , television programs and video games . The battle is discussed in many books and articles on the theory and practice of warfare . The movies The 300 Spartans ( 1962 ) and 300 ( 2007 ) were based on the events during and close to the time of the battle .

Prior to the battle , the Hellenes remembered the Dorians , an ethnic distinction to which the Spartans belonged , as the conquerors and displacers of the Ionians in the Peloponnesus . After the battle , Spartan culture became an inspiration and object of emulation , a phenomenon known as Laconophilia .