# 8-5 The Persian Wars

Throughout the early fifth century B.C.E., the foreign policy interests of Athens and Sparta more or less coincided. Both were primarily concerned with maintaining their independence in the face of foreign threats. These threats originated from Achaemenid Persia, which had expanded rapidly in the 500s, as described in Chapter 7. They took the form of two Greco-Persian wars.

The First **Persian War** (The conflict between the Greeks and the Persian Empire in the fifth century B.C.E., fought in two installments and ending with Greek victory.) ended with an Athenian victory. The Persian emperor Darius I was faced with rebellion that was spreading among some of his Greek subjects on the Turkish coast (Ionia). When he attempted to subdue them, Athens went to their aid. Determined to punish the Athenians for their boldness and wishing in any case to expand his domain still further, Darius sent an army across the Aegean Sea to the Greek mainland. Aided by brilliant generalship, the Athenians were waiting and defeated the Persian expedition at the battle of Marathon (MAYR-uh-thon) in 490.

The Second Persian War (480–478 B.C.E.) was fought on both land and sea and resulted in an even more decisive Greek victory. Ten years passed before Darius's successor, Xerxes (ZERK-sees), could find time to take up the challenge. This time, not only Athens but several other Greek poleis assisted the defensive effort. Under their king, Leonidas (lee-uh-NEYE-duhs), Spartan troops lived up to their fame at the battle of Thermopylae in 480 and again at the decisive defeat of the Persian force at Platea (plah-TEE-ah) in 479. The Athenian navy completely routed the larger Persian fleet at Salamis and established Athens as the premier naval force in the eastern Mediterranean.

By the end of these Persian Wars, the Greeks had decisively turned back the attempts of the Asian empire to establish a universal monarchy over the Mediterranean basin. It was, in retrospect, a crucial turning point for Western civilization. The idea that, at least in the long run, the common man was capable of perceiving the common good and of ruling wisely and effectively toward that end—the belief in democracy—would have been submerged, perhaps indefinitely, beneath the acquiescence to the rule of the privileged, for the privileged.

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