

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Persian Wars

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2016

Mark Cartwright is a scholar of Greek philosophy and a frequent contributor to the Ancient History Encyclopedia. In the 5th century B.C., the Achaemenid Empire of Persia (modern-day Iran) launched an invasion of Greece. The empire attempted to conquer the Greek city-states with greater numbers and a vast army. A series of conflicts known as the Greco-Persian Wars (or Persian Wars) broke out between the two, an event that would dramatically shape both societies for years to come. As you read, take notes on the methods the Greeks used to obtain victory in battle and in the overall war.

- [1] The Persian Wars refers to the conflict between Greece and Persia in the 5th century B.C. which involved two invasions by the latter¹ in 490 and 480 B.C. Several of the most famous and significant battles in history were fought during the Wars, these were at Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis, and Plataea, all of which would become legendary. The Greeks were, ultimately, victorious and their civilization preserved. If they had been defeated then the western world may not have inherited from them such lasting cultural contributions as democracy, classical architecture and sculpture, theatre, and the Olympic Games.



"Die Seeschlacht bei Salamis" by Wilhelm von Kaulbach is in the public domain.

Origins of the Wars

Persia, under the rule of Darius² (r. 522-486 B.C.), was already expanding into mainland Europe and had subjugated³ Ionia,⁴ Thrace,⁵ and Macedonia⁶ by the beginning of the 5th century B.C. Next in king Darius' sights were Athens⁷ and the rest of Greece. Just why Greece was coveted⁸ by Persia is unclear. Wealth and resources seem an unlikely motive; other more plausible⁹ suggestions include the need to increase the prestige¹⁰ of the king at home or to quell¹¹ once and for all a collection of potentially troublesome rebel states on the western border of the empire. The Ionian rebellion,¹² the offering of earth and water in submission¹³ to the Persian satrap¹⁴ in 508 B.C., and the attack by Athens and Eretria¹⁵ on the city of Sardis¹⁶ in 499 B.C. had not been forgotten either.

1. **Latter (adjective):** referring to the second or last mentioned of things
2. Under Darius I, the First Persian Empire became the largest empire in the world, controlling the largest fraction of the world's population of any empire in history (approximately 50 million people).
3. **Subjugate (verb):** to bring under domination or control, especially by conquest
4. Ionia is the ancient name of the central region of Anatolia's Aegean shore in present-day Turkey, an important center in the ancient Greek world.
5. Thrace is a historical and geographical area in southeast Europe, centered on the borders of Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey.
6. The borders have changed over the years, but Macedonia is a geographical and historical region of the Balkan peninsula located in southeastern Europe. It is particularly known in ancient times as the kingdom of Alexander the Great.

Whatever the exact motives, in 491 B.C. Darius once again sent envoys¹⁷ to call for the Greeks' submission to Persian rule. The Greeks sent a no-nonsense reply by executing the envoys, and Athens and Sparta promised to form an alliance¹⁸ for the defense of Greece. Darius' response to this diplomatic outrage was to launch a naval force of 600 ships and 25,000 men to attack the Cyclades¹⁹ and Euboea,²⁰ leaving the Persians just one step away from the rest of Greece.

Marathon

Darius did not lead the invasion of mainland Greece in person but put his general Datis in charge of his cosmopolitan²¹ army. Second-in-command was Artaphernes, Darius' nephew, who perhaps led the 2,000-strong Persian cavalry.²² The total strength of the Persian army was perhaps 90,000 men. The Greeks were led by either Miltiades²³ or Callimachus²⁴ and they commanded a total force of only between 10,000 and 20,000, probably nearer the lower figure. The long-range assault²⁵ tactics²⁶ of the Persian archers was to come up against the heavy infantry²⁷ of Greek hoplites²⁸ with their large round shields, spears and swords, and organized in a solid line or phalanx where each man's shield protected both himself and his neighbor in a wall of bronze.

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7. Athens is the current capital of Greece and was one of the most important city-states in ancient Greece. It was known for its cultural and intellectual flourish.
 8. **Covet (verb):** to desire or want to possess something
 9. **Plausible (adjective):** seemingly reasonable or probable
 10. **Prestige (noun):** widespread respect and admiration for someone based on their achievements
 11. **Quell (verb):** to put an end to, typically by force
 12. The Ionian Revolt (499 BC – 493 BC) involved military rebellions by several Greek regions of Asia Minor against Persian rule.
 13. **Submission (noun):** yielding to a greater force or to the will or authority of another person
 14. **Satrap (noun):** governors of the provinces of the ancient Persian Empires
 15. Eretria is a town in Euboea, Greece, and was an important in the 6th and 5th centuries BC.
 16. Sardis was an important ancient city located in western Anatolia (in modern-day Turkey). In 498/499 BC, as part of the Ionian Revolt, Ionian, Athenian, and Eretrian troops captured and burnt Sardis.
 17. **Envoy (noun):** a messenger, representative, or diplomat
 18. **Alliance (noun):** a tie or association formed with mutual benefit, especially between countries
 19. The Cyclades are a group of islands in the southern Aegean Sea located between Greece and Turkey.
 20. Euboea or Evia is the second-largest Greek island in land and population.
 21. **Cosmopolitan (adjective):** multi-ethnic or -national; worldly, experienced
 22. **Calvary (noun):** soldiers who fought on horseback
 23. Miltiades (c. 550 BC – 489 BC) is best known for his role in the Battle of Marathon, the tactics for which he is often credited.
 24. Callimachus was an Athenian polemarch, which is a senior military title in ancient Greek city-states, at the Battle of Marathon.
 25. **Assault (adjective):** describing or relating to an attack
 26. **Tactic (noun):** a plan or strategy
 27. **Infantry (noun):** soldiers marching or fighting on foot
 28. Hoplites were citizen-soldiers of ancient Greek city-states, and were mainly armed with spears and shields.

- [5] When the two armies clashed on the plain of Marathon²⁹ in September 490 B.C., the Persian tactic of rapidly firing vast numbers of arrows into the enemy must have been an awesome³⁰ sight, but the lightness of the arrows meant that they were largely ineffective against the bronze-armored hoplites. At close quarters the Greeks thinned their center and extended their flanks to envelop³¹ the enemy lines. This and their longer spears, heavier swords, better armor, and rigid discipline of the phalanx formation meant that the Greek hoplites won a great victory against the odds. According to tradition 6,400 Persians were dead, for only 192 Greeks. Victory dedications and statues were erected and, for the Greeks, the Battle of Marathon quickly became the stuff of legend. Meanwhile, the Persian fleet³² fled back to Asia but they would be back, and next time, in even bigger numbers.

Thermopylae

Within a decade, King Xerxes³³ continued his predecessor Darius' vision, and in 480 B.C. he gathered a huge invasion force to attack Greece again, this time via the pass at Thermopylae³⁴ on the east coast. In August 480 B.C. a small band of Greeks led by Spartan King Leonidas³⁵ held the pass for three days³⁶ but were annihilated.³⁷ At the same time, the Greek fleet managed to hold off the Persians at the indecisive naval battle at Artemision.³⁸ Together, these battles bought Greece time and allowed for its cities to steel³⁹ themselves for the bigger challenges yet to come.

Salamis

The defeat at Thermopylae, though glorious, allowed the Persians to make in-roads into Greece. Consequently, many states now turned over to the Persians and Athens itself was sacked. In response, a Greek army led by Leonidas' brother Kleombrotos began to build a defensive wall near Corinth⁴⁰ but winter halted the land campaign. The next vital engagement was going to be at sea.

In September 480 B.C. at Salamis⁴¹ in the Saronic Gulf,⁴² the Greeks once more faced a larger enemy force. The exact numbers are much disputed but a figure of 500 Persian ships against a Greek fleet of 300 seems the most likely estimate. The hoplites had won at Marathon, now it was the turn of the trireme to take center stage, the fast and maneuverable Greek warship powered by three banks of oars and armed with a bronze ram. The Persians also had triremes but the Greeks had an ace up their sleeve, the great Athenian general Themistocles.⁴³ He, with 20 years of experience and the confidence from his leadership at Artemision, employed a bold plan to entice the Persian fleet into the narrow straits of Salamis⁴⁴ and hit the enemy fleet so hard it had nowhere to retreat⁴⁵ to.

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29. The plain of Marathon refers to the area of the town of Marathon (located in East Attica) in Greece whereon the battle was fought.
30. "Awe-inspiring"
31. **Envelop (verb):** to surround
32. **Fleet (noun):** the largest group of naval ships under one commander, organized for specific purposes
33. Xerxes I (r. 486 BC – 465 BC) was the son of Darius I and the fourth king of the Achaemenid dynasty of Persia. Xerxes the Great would conquer, however briefly, more of the Grecian mainland than his father.
34. Thermopylae is a narrow mountain passage in coastal central Greece.
35. King Leonidas of Sparta (r. 489 BC – 480 BC) is best known for his participation in the Battle of Thermopylae, a part which has been adapted in a comic book series and feature film named 300.
36. He held the pass by preventing the Persian army from passing through Thermopylae.
37. **Annihilate (verb):** to destroy utterly
38. Also known as Artemisium
39. **Steel (verb):** to mentally prepare oneself to do or face something difficult
40. Corinth was an important city in Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman eras as a center of trade and in its role in a number of Greek wars.

Themistocles won a great victory and the remaining Persian ships retreated to Asia Minor. The cryptic⁴⁶ oracle⁴⁷ of Apollo at Delphi⁴⁸ had been proved right: “only a wooden wall will keep you safe” and the wooden triremes of the Greeks had done their job. But still, this was not the end. There would be one more battle, the largest ever yet seen in Greece, and it would decide her fate for centuries to follow.

Plataea

- [10] After Salamis Xerxes returned home to his palace at Sousa⁴⁹ but he left the gifted general Mardonius in charge of the invasion, which was still very much on. The Persian position remained strong despite the naval defeat—they still controlled much of Greece and their large land army was intact. After a series of political negotiations, it became clear that the Persians would not gain victory on land through diplomacy⁵⁰ and the two opposing armies met at Plataea in Boeotia⁵¹ in August 479 B.C.

The Greeks fielded⁵² the largest hoplite army ever seen which came from some 30 city-states and numbered around 110,000. The Persians possessed a similar number of troops, perhaps slightly more but, again, there are no exact figures agreed upon by scholars. Although cavalry and archers played their part, it was, once again, the superiority of the hoplite and phalanx, which won the Greeks the battle. Finally, they had ended Xerxes’ ambitions in Greece.

Aftermath

In addition to victory at Plataea, at the roughly contemporary Battle of Mycale⁵³ in Ionia, the Greek fleet led by Leotychides⁵⁴ landed an army, which wiped out the Persian garrison⁵⁵ there and killed the commander Tigranes. The Ionian states were sworn back into the Hellenic Alliance⁵⁶ and the Delian League⁵⁷ established to ward off any future Persian attacks. Further, the Chersonnese⁵⁸ controlling the Black Sea and Byzantium⁵⁹ controlling the Bosphorus⁶⁰ were both retaken. Persia would remain a threat with odd skirmishes⁶¹ and battles occurring across the Aegean⁶² over the next 30 years but mainland Greece had survived its greatest danger. In c. 449 B.C. a peace was finally signed, the Peace of Callias, between the two opposing civilizations.

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41. Salamis is an island in the Saronic Gulf near Athens.
 42. The Saronic Gulf, or Gulf of Aegina, forms part of the Aegean Sea and the eastern side of the isthmus of Corinth.
 43. Themistocles (c. 524 BC – 460 BC) was an Athenian statesman and general.
 44. The battle itself was fought in the straits, or narrow waterways, between the mainland and the island of Salamis.
 45. **Retreat (verb):** to withdraw an army from enemy forces due to their greater power or to defeat
 46. **Cryptic (adjective):** mysterious
 47. **Oracle (noun):** one who predicts the future; a priest or priestess who acts as a medium for the gods
 48. Dating back to 1400 BC, the oracle of Delphi was one of the most important shrines in all of Greece, considered to be the center of the world. A priestess of Apollo, the Greek god of the sun and of prophecy, would serve as oracle of this temple.
 49. Also spelled “Susa,” Sousa was an ancient city of the First Persian Empire, and one of the most important cities of the ancient Near East.
 50. **Diplomacy (noun):** management of international relations, typically between countries through representatives
 51. Boeotia is a regional unit in central Greece, and the city of Plataea is located in the southeast of Boeotia south of Thebes.
 52. **Field (verb):** to send out
 53. The Battle of Mycale took place around August 27, 479 BC near Mount Mycale, on the coast of Ionia.
 54. Leotychidas was a Spartan ruler and a leader of Sparta in the Persian Wars.
 55. **Garrison (noun):** troops stationed in a fortress or town to defend it
 56. The Hellenic Alliance was a confederate alliance of Greek city-states formed in 481 BC.
 57. The Delian League, or Athenian League, was an alliance of Greek city-states. Formed in 478 BC and led by Athens, it was intended as a defense against encroaching Persian rule.

While the Greeks were euphoric⁶³ in victory, the Persian Empire was not dealt a deathblow by its defeat. Indeed, Xerxes' sacking of Athens was probably enough to allow him to present himself as a returning hero but, as with other wars, there are no written records by the Persians and so their view of the conflict can only be speculated. Whatever, the Persian Empire continued to thrive for another 100 years. For Greece, however, the victory not only guaranteed her freedom from foreign rule but also permitted, soon after, an astonishingly rich period of artistic and cultural endeavor, which would lay the cultural foundations of all future Western civilizations.

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58. May be referring to people residing on the Gallipoli peninsula
 59. Byzantium was an ancient Greek colony on the site that would later become Constantinople, or modern-day Istanbul.
 60. Bosphorus is a narrow and internationally-significant strait located in northwestern Turkey that forms part of the continental boundary between Europe and Asia.
 61. **Skirmish (adjective):** an episode of irregular fighting, usually between small or outlying parts of armies
 62. The Aegean Sea, which is located between the mainlands of Greece and Turkey and connects to the Mediterranean Sea.
 63. **Euphoric (adjective):** characterized by or feeling intense excitement and happiness

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes the text's central ideas?
 - A. The Persians were justified in their invasion of Greece, having tried to make peace with them only to have their diplomats killed.
 - B. The Battle of Thermopylae, as well as the rest of the Persian Wars, was not as climactic as legend and popular culture would have people believe.
 - C. Winning the Persian Wars sparked a new wave of art, literature, and culture that would influence the Western world for centuries.
 - D. The loss against the smaller collection of Greek city-states was one of the major contributing factors of the downfall of the Persian Empire.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "If they had been defeated then the western world may not have inherited from them such lasting cultural contributions as democracy, classical architecture and sculpture, theatre, and the Olympic Games." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "Whatever the exact motives, in 491 B.C. Darius once again sent envoys to call for the Greeks' submission to Persian rule. The Greeks sent a no-nonsense reply by executing the envoys...." (Paragraph 3)
 - C. "In August 480 B.C. a small band of Greeks led by Spartan King Leonidas held the pass for three days but were killed to a man." (Paragraph 6)
 - D. "Although cavalry and archers played their part, it was, once again, the superiority of the hoplite and phalanx, which won the Greeks the battle. Finally, they had ended Xerxes' ambitions in Greece." (Paragraph 11)

3. Which of the following best describes Darius I's motivations for invading Greece?
 - A. Darius I invaded Greece as a means of further expanding his empire and obtaining access to the Mediterranean trading channels.
 - B. There is no clear reason why Darius I invaded Greece; it was likely done because Darius I personally coveted Greece.
 - C. Darius I invaded Greece for wealth, for Greece, particularly Athens, was in its cultural height or golden age.
 - D. There is no clear reason why Darius I invaded Greece; it was likely done for prestige and to suppress feelings of rebellion.

4. Compare the Battle of Marathon to the Battle of Thermopylae. What was the significance of both battles in the larger scope of the Persian Wars?

5. PART A: According to the author, which of the following military strategies best ensured Greek victory?
- A. The author likely credits the Greek hoplites and phalanx formation, combined with naval strength, which won them victories in a number of decisive battles.
 - B. The author likely credits the Greeks' enthusiasm for battle and their eagerness to protect their homes.
 - C. The author likely credits Greek military alliances, which, when combined, overshadowed the army of the Persian Empire.
 - D. The author likely credits the Greek ship trireme exclusively as the one superior military invention to that of the Persian Empire.
6. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "Victory dedications and statues were erected and, for the Greeks, the Battle of Marathon quickly became the stuff of legend." (Paragraph 5)
 - B. "The Persians also had triremes but the Greeks had an ace up their sleeve, the great Athenian general Themistocles." (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "Although cavalry and archers played their part, it was, once again, the superiority of the hoplite and phalanx, which won the Greeks the battle." (Paragraph 11)
 - D. "The Ionian states were sworn back into the Hellenic Alliance and the Delian League established to ward off any future Persian attacks." (Paragraph 12)

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the context of this passage, how are we changed by war? What impact did the Greco-Persian Wars have on both sides? How did it affect Western world history? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.