Battle of Thermopylae

In the 5th century BC, the Persian empire fought the city-states of Greece in one of the most profoundly symbolic struggles in history. Their wars would determine the viability of a new direction in Western culture. Persia represented the old ways — a world of magi and god-kings, where priests stood guard over knowledge and emperors treated even their highest subjects as slaves. The Greeks had cast off their own god-kings and were beginning to think of limited political freedom (through democracy), to innovate in art, literature and religion, and to develop new ways of thinking.

The long path to battle at Thermopylae began in what is now Iran, heart of the once vast
Persian empire.

The Persian King Darius was furious to learn that a distant city called Athens had dared to assist his rebellious subjects in Asia Minor. Grant, O God, he said, shooting an arrow into the air, that I may punish the Athenians. He even commanded one of his servants to interrupt him during every dinner three times to remind him of his goal, with the words: “Master, remember the Athenians”. The first Persian War ended badly for Darius, however, when his troops were defeated by a smaller Athenian army at Marathon in 490 BC. Greece was saved — but only for a while.

Many years later Darius' son Xerxes was visited by a ghost who appeared in his dreams and urged him to invade Greece to take revenge against Athens.

Xerxes spent more than four years gathering a vast and apparently awe-inspiring force — according to Herodotus, whenever it stopped to slake its thirst, it drank entire rivers dry.

Within Xerxes' army, the native Persian contingent was most privileged. Carriages full of women and servants accompanied the Persians on the march. One Persian unit was particularly esteemed: a crack fighting force that Herodotus called the Immortals, alleging that any dead, wounded or sick soldier in its ranks was replaced so swiftly that its 10,000- man strength never seemed to diminish.

Watching his own army pass in review, Xerxes himself is said to have wept as he reflected on the brevity of human life. Not one of them, he observed, would be alive in 100 years' time.

It is entirely possible that Xerxes did not anticipate having to fight any significant battles in Greece. The magnitude of his force was so great that he must have anticipated only demanding surrender in order to receive it. Like his father before him, he sent messengers ahead demanding the traditional tokens of submission — earth and water. Many Greek towns relented in the face of certain destruction.

Two cities were spared the indignity of the Persian ultimatum. Xerxes well recalled the fate of the messengers his father had sent to Athens and Sparta. The Athenians had thrown them into a pit. In Sparta the Persian diplomats were shown the place to find the earth and water they sought — by being pushed down a well.

Xerxes was familiar with the wilful Athenians who had thwarted his father at Marathon 10 years earlier, but along the march he slowly became acquainted with Greece's other most powerful city- state. At one point he asked a Spartan exile if anyone in Greece would dare resist his force. The exile admitted that no length of odds could possibly convince the Spartans to submit. The Spartans, he said, feared only the law, and their law forbade them to retreat in battle. It commanded them to stand firm always and to conquer or die.

To the Greek strategists in 481 BC, Thermopylae represented their best chance to stop or at least delay the Persian army long enough to allow their combined fleets to draw the Persian navy into a decisive sea battle. A narrow mountain pass, Thermopylae was a bottleneck through which the Persian army somehow had to proceed. Forced to fight there, the Persians would be unable to take advantage of their massive numbers; instead, they would have to face the Greeks in close-quarter, hand-to-hand combat.

Two armies now prepared to converge on the tiny mountain pass.

The Greek force that now raced to Thermopylae was ridiculously small for the challenge that awaited it: 300 Spartans, 80 Myceneans, 500 Tegeans, 700 Thespians and so forth, totalling about 4,900.

If any Greek understood the danger of his assignment, it was almost certainly the Spartan commander, Leonidas. Although each city's contingent had its own leader, Leonidas had been placed in overall command of the Greek army. He had handpicked the 300 warriors under his command; all were middle-aged men with children to leave behind as heirs. He had selected men to die. Leonidas and the Spartans had been trained to do their duty, and, having received an oracle that Sparta must either lose a king or see the city destroyed, Leonidas was convinced that his final duty was death.

The Thermopylae pass was only 50 feet wide and far narrower at some points. There were hot springs there — these gave the pass its name — an altar to Heracles and the remains of an old wall with gates that had fallen into ruin. The Greeks now rushed to rebuild it.

As Xerxes' army drew closer, a Persian scout rode to survey the Greek camp. What he saw astonished him — the Spartans, many of them naked and exercising, the rest calmly combing their hair. It was common practice for the Spartans to fix their hair when they were about to risk their lives, but neither the scout nor his king could comprehend such apparent vanity.

The Persian army encamped on flat grounds only a short distance from Thermopylae. There, Xerxes stopped his troops for four days, waiting upon the inevitable flight of the overawed Greeks. By the fifth day, August 17, 480 BC, the great king could no longer control his temper. The impudent Greeks were defying his will. He now sent forward his first wave of troops with orders to take the Greeks alive.

The troops were repulsed with heavy casualties. Determined to punish the resisters, Xerxes sent in his Immortals. The crack Persian troops advanced confidently, envisioning an easy victory, but they had no more success.

What Xerxes had not anticipated was that the Greeks held the tactical advantage at Thermopylae. The tight battlefield nullified the Persians' numerical advantage, and the Persian army was neither trained nor equipped for close fighting. Its preferred tactic was to volley arrows from a distance, the archers firing from behind the protection of wicker shields planted in the ground. They wore very little armour and carried only daggers and short spears for hand-to-hand combat.

Greek soldiers perhaps drew some confidence from their heavy armour and their long spears, which could outreach the Persian swords. But the Greeks also had another, more intangible, edge: something to fight for. They were defending their homes, and they were doing their duty — they were not fighting as slaves of some half mad god-king. As heavy casualties sapped their soldiers' resolve, the Persian commanders had to resort to lashing them with whips in order to drive them against the determined Greek defenders.

During that long first day of fighting, the Spartans led the Greek resistance. Experienced Spartan warriors would come out from behind the walls, do fierce battle with the Persians, then feign retreat in order to draw the Persians into a trap. Xerxes reportedly leapt to his feet three times in fear for his army.

The second day of Thermopylae followed much the same course as the first. The various Greek contingents now took turns fending off the attacks, but the Persians failed to make any headway.

It is difficult to say how long the Greeks could have held off the Persians at Thermopylae — their casualties thus far were comparatively light – however the Greek’s impregnable site possessed a hidden weakness: There was a track through the mountains that could be used by an enemy force to surround and annihilate the defenders of the gate.

In the end it was a Greek who betrayed the secret. The traitor, Ephialtes, was apparently motivated by greed when he revealed the mountain path to Xerxes. Acting on the new information, the king sent Persian troops up the path during the night, when darkness concealed their movement among the oak trees.

Lookouts raced down the hill to warn Leonidas of the descending Persian army. There was little time left. A quick council of war led to the decision to split up the Greek force. There was no reason for the entire army to be annihilated at the wall. Most contingents were now allowed to return home and prepare for a later showdown. Leonidas and his Spartans, however, would remain at Thermopylae. Standing by them were the loyal Thespians, who considered it an honour to die fighting beside the Spartans.

Knowing that this struggle would be their last, they pressed stolidly forward, leaving behind the safety of the wall to fight in the widest part of the pass. There, they would battle the massive Persian army on open ground.

Xerxes ordered his men in for the kill. Once again his commanders lashed their own troops to drive them forward. Many Persians were trampled to death by their own comrades. Others, shoved aside, drowned in the sea. All the while, the Spartans and Thespians did their deadly work. No one, wrote Herodotus, could count the number of the dead.

The Greeks fought with their long spears until the shafts had all broken. Then they fought with swords. In the course of the struggle, Leonidas fulfilled the prophecy that had doomed him and was killed by arrows. Four times the Greeks drove the enemy away from his body before the Persians finally succeeded in dragging it away. It was about then that the second Persian force arrived from the mountain pass.

Now completely surrounded, the exhausted Greeks withdrew for the last time behind the wall and formed themselves into a single compact unit. Here, wrote Herodotus, they resisted to the last, with their swords, if they had them, and, if not, with their hands and teeth, until the Persians, coming on from the front over the ruins of the wall and closing in from behind, finally overwhelmed them.

The Battle of Thermopylae was over. Leonidas and his 300 Spartans all lay dead, as did the 700 Thespians who had stood by them. The Persian dead were said to number around 20,000, although Xerxes tried to conceal this horrendous loss by having most of them secretly buried, leaving only about 1,000 Persian bodies for his army to see as it marched through the pass.

It was customary in Sparta to make great ceremony over the death of a king. Riders would carry the news throughout the country, and women would go around the capital, beating cauldrons. But Leonidas was denied even a proper burial. Xerxes ordered his head cut off and fixed on a stake.

The Greeks' courageous stand at the mountain pass had hardly even slowed Xerxes' advance. Four days of waiting and three days of fighting — Leonidas' heroism had bought only one more week for his compatriots. Athens, all but abandoned, was soon sacked.

And yet Thermopylae was not a total failure. The invading army had been bloodied and it must have had some effect on Persian morale. The battle's influence on the Greeks was indisputable. When the war was over they established holidays commemorating Thermopylae and erected memorials over the battlefield.

Thermopylae thus acquired great significance. In the end, the battle's value lay not in land gained or lost or in men killed or captured, but in inspiration. The Spartans and Thespians had taught Greece and the world an enduring lesson about courage in the face of impossible odds.

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