

Battle of thermopylae

War



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The rise of the Achaemenid Empire in the 6th century BC is shrouded in mist of antiquity. It sprang in the region encompassing present day southern Iran and Iraq. A disparate group of tribes of Indo-European origin serving as vassals to the Medes controlled the region east of Tigris from their capital Ecbatana (near Hamadan). Here, around 650 BC the religion of Zoroastrianism was founded uniting the populace as an enlightened people into a political force.

In 559 BC a devout Zoroastrian, Cyrus became the head of an obscure tribe and he set about uniting the other into a fighting force and in five years he had defeated the Medes and conquered all Persia. Lydia in Asia Minor and Babylon soon followed and by the time he died, as Cyrus the Great in 529 BC had founded the Persian Empire. After his death, his son Cambyses conquered Egypt in 525 BC. Indeed, the growth had been so rapid that rebellions sprang up and it fell upon Cambyses's son Darius (The Great) to quell these uprisings and institute satrapies or self-governing colonies across the empire.

It was sheer administrative genius, military planning with a humanistic view that transformed disparate tribes into a formidable world power. By the 5th century Persian power extended from the river Indus to the shores of Mediterranean, North Africa, Thrace, Greece and Macedonia on the European continent. Following the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization large numbers of Greeks moved to Asia Minor and significant among them were three tribal groups, Aeolians, Dorian and Ionians who settled around Lydia and Caria establishing twelve cities which made up Ionia.

These were independent states but they all acknowledged a common heritage. They enjoyed this status till they were conquered by the Lydian King Croesus. The Ionians were invited by Cyrus the Great to rebel against Lydian rule which was turned down forcing Cyrus to conquer Ionia in 540 BC and thereafter to be ruled by local satraps. During the rule of Darius the Great in 499 BC the cities of Ionia were incited to rebellion against the tyrants representing Persian rule and in 498 BC the Ionians with support from Athens and Eretria destroyed Sardis provoking the Persians into decisively beating them at the battle of Ephesus.

The Ionian Rebellion was the first major conflict between the Greeks and the Persian Empire. Asia Minor was subdued but Darius the Great saw the myriad Greek states as a threat to the stability of the Empire and was bent upon conquering the whole of Greece. In 492 BC as a consequence of this rebellion first steps were taken to secure land routes to Greece by re-taking Thrace and forcing Macedonia to become a client state of Persia. In 491 BC Darius sent emissaries to Greek cities seeking their submission.

Most complied with the terms but Athens put the ambassadors to death and in Sparta they were thrown down a well. Thus both cities were now effectively at war with Persia. Darius next dispatched a force which besieged and destroyed Noxos and Eretria and then confronted a vastly outnumbered Athenian army at Marathon. The ensuing battle of Marathon was a remarkable victory for Athens resulting in the withdrawal of the force to Asia Minor. A major campaign against Greece was now in preparation when Darius died in 486 BC leaving son Xerxes I in command.

A rebellion in Egypt delayed progress on this front and preparations resumed once the rebellion had been quelled. By early 480 BC Xerxes was ready and marched his army across the Hellespont to Europe using pontoon bridges. Spartans and Athenians were also preparing for war and in 481 BC the Congress of Corinth was held at which confederation of the city states was formed and they thought that the invader would have to traverse the narrow pass at Thermopylae on way to southern Greece, which could be blocked by a smaller force.

Furthermore, to prevent Persians bypassing Thermopylae by sea a naval flotilla gathered to block strait of Artemisium. It was August by the time the Persians arrived. This is a time of year when the Spartans celebrate the festival of Carneia and the Olympic games. A time of truce, during which war is forbidden but the urgency of the situation persuaded King Leonides I of Sparta to take 300 royal bodyguards and support troops as an advance expedition to block the pass and await the arrival of the main Spartan army.

According to historian Herodotus the Spartans had consulted the Oracle of Delphi, (The high priestess of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, Pythia) was credited with powers of prophecy O ye men who dwell in the streets of broad Lacedaemon! 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 (Rawlinson translation of Herodotus VII, 242) In keeping with this prophecy Leonides I was convinced he was going to certain death.

Once the Persians were sighted the Allies decided to make a stand at Thermopylae. The Persians offered surrender terms and asked the Greeks to

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lay down their weapons to which Leonides 1 is said to have responded “ come and get them” (Holland, p269-270). The Persians had mustered an overwhelming force even though historians don't seem to agree on a precise number. Modern scholars estimates vary from 25, 000 (Hans Delbruck) to 100, 000 -200, 000 (Ulrich Wilcken and Tom Holland). There were 11, 000 - 12, 000 Greeks in a combined force.

Five days after arriving Xerxes launched a frontal attack. The Greeks formed a phalanx of overlapping shields and layered spear points across the width of the pass stopping the Persians from breaking through. This proved most effective as the wicker shields and shorter spears of the Persians prevented an effective engagement. On the second day too, the Persians fared no better but later that day the Persians got help from a traitor in locating a mountain path round the pass thereby out-flanking and encircling the Greeks.

Some suggested withdrawal, but Leonides resolved to stay with the Spartans at the Pass forming a rear-guard to enable other allied contingents to withdraw. At dawn on the third day the Allies came forward to the wider part of the pass to engage the Persians. They fought with spears and short swords and Leonides 1 also perished in this assault. Thereafter the Persian surrounded the Greeks and rained down volley after volley of arrows opening up the pass to the Persians who proceeded to burn and sack cities which had not submitted. Xerxes then retreated back to Asia leaving a Satrap to complete the conquest.

Thermopylae was undoubtedly a defeat for the Allies but is arguably the most famous battle of European ancient history. References Bradford, Ernle <https://assignbuster.com/battle-of-thermopylae/>

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